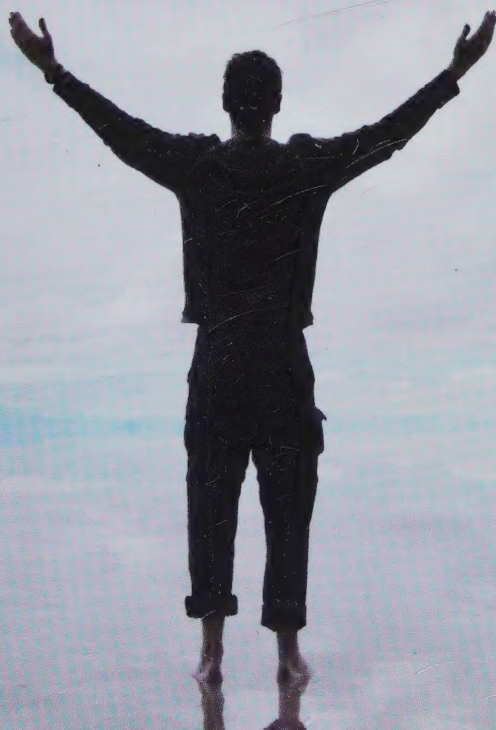



AROUND MY WORLD

A DETOUR ON LIFE'S JOURNEY

JASON THIESSEN





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JASON THIESSEN

iUniverse, Inc.
Bloomington

Around My World

A Detour on Life's Journey

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To Isabelle, Sam, and Will with all my heart.

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the words written in this book were done so from a chair that he sat at for many years creating his beautiful needlepoint pieces. If I ultimately become half the man that he was I will count myself the luckiest man alive. I miss you Grandpa. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your life. You live on in me, and in your great-grandson, Sam, whose middle name is yours.

Introduction

Sometimes in life we are faced with detours. They aren't always the most enjoyable things to navigate. They may have been thrust upon us just when we thought we had life all figured out. Then again, sometimes detours are self-created. We *choose* to take them, driven by some inner desire or passion. Regardless, a detour is nothing if not a learning opportunity—a chance to change directions and live life in a way we didn't think we ever would, or could.

My detour was of the self-created variety. It was a long time in the making but I eventually took it. This book is about that detour—a journey around the world. My 155-day odyssey took me literally *around* the entire planet, visiting some of the world's most venerated and celebrated sites as well as some of its deepest and darkest places. After traveling over 80,000 kilometres by various mode of transport—some decidedly unsafe—I returned home forever changed, though the change was one of nuance rather than extreme.

The dreams I had as a young boy became my reality when I got off what was a very traditional life path. I took a risk and removed myself from what would be considered a rather normal, if not mundane, life—get up, go to work, pay mortgage, try to sleep, repeat—in order to explore a world that had fascinated me for nearly thirty years.

Many people as young adults take a gap year to go backpacking in order to get the travel bug out of their systems and explore their inner worlds. I, on the other hand, waited until my mid-thirties—when I had the crushing weight of a career, mortgage, and myriad expectations—before extracting myself from it all to live out a dream.

In the Beginning

I remember my very first atlas. It was the *Time* atlas, published in 1980. I was nine years old. I still have it. Sure, it's seen better days, but every time I look at it I feel like a nine-year-old kid again. As a child I looked at it and wondered if I would ever see the places I was learning about in its pages. Were these countries much like my own? Were the people the same? How about the food? Were they wondering about me, or my country?

The sense of wonder that came with being nine was, for me, exponentially compounded when faced with a book such as an atlas. I learned that languages were different in each of the countries, as was the religion, amongst other things. Religion—what was that? Why would religion or language, or currency, be different in one country that was right next to another country? I was fascinated each and every time I sat down to turn those pages and it was then that I started thinking for the first time about traveling.

Would I ever get to go to those far off places, and how far away were they, anyway? How would I get there? What would I see and do once I got there? How long would it take to see everything? What would I have to do to cross one of those dashed lines on the page that represented a border between countries? That atlas became my escape. I read it constantly, always asked questions, and then carefully put it back afterward. While my friends at the time seemed interested in things like trading cards, toy cars and cartoons, I was interested in that atlas, and the world it represented.

As I continued to read it, and learn more and more about the world, I became very possessive of both the atlas and the world it depicted. The atlas *was* the world, and I wanted to discover it all. As the explorer in me began to emerge I became more and more aware of my feelings toward the

world and my interest in traveling within it, and around it. I began feeling a strong desire to travel *around my world*.

I was obsessed with numbers. I wanted to know the populations of all the great cities of the world. I somehow thought it important to count the number of cities in each country that had more than one million inhabitants. There were (at the time) over thirty of them in China, and two in Canada. Why was that important? I had no clue. Nor did I understand that the vastness of the earth could not possibly be interpreted on those 8½ x 11-inch pages. Each country had faint boundaries and each had its own colour, I guessed this was the case so young people like me could tell where, for example, India ended and Pakistan began.

When the board game Trivial Pursuit came out I was in heaven. I was that annoying little kid who knew all of the answers to the blue geography questions, not to mention most of the orange sports questions too. I also fell in love with the history questions. I loved the fact that I actually knew many of the answers. The ones I didn't know provided me the push to go learn and better understand them.

I would go to my atlas, or to *National Geographic*, or to *Time* magazine, or to whatever source I could find that would help me better understand and, more importantly, be able to answer those questions the next time around. My family was amazed at my extensive knowledge of the world—not bad for someone who had only ever left Canada twice; to go to Disneyland.

At my elementary school I was probably one of only a few kids that took out books from the library other than those assigned in class. I loved to hang out there and look through the geography books and atlases. I did a research paper in grade five on the Tasmanian Devil. Not because of the animal itself but because it was an animal from an exotic country in as remote a place as could be imagined. It was also exciting because most kids thought it was just a cartoon, and I would be the one to tell them otherwise.

In grade six we learned about the pharaohs of Egypt. I remember wondering if this place called Egypt still existed and, if so, where it was. What we were learning about made it sound like quite an amazing place. It was the type of place that when you died they took your brain out through your nose and cut you open to empty out your insides. Then, they wrapped you up in a blanket and put you in a big stone box. This was pretty heady stuff for a 12-year-old kid. I found it all incredibly fascinating.

It was doubly interesting because my teacher was so cute. Okay, so I was 12, but that didn't mean that I wasn't starting to develop other interests. This was, after all, the same teacher that taught the sex education class. Imagine that; mummification and sex education in the same semester. Life was good.

I continued my interest in geography and history into my junior high school years. My favorite class then was social studies. It combined all the things that I liked and it was easily my favorite class and the one I did best in. I was in love. While most of the other boys during that time were talking about how they built a birdhouse or ashtray in industrial arts I was talking about how the USSR had as many warheads as the USA and actually had more people in the armed services—wasn't that interesting? How and why did this happen? Well, there was a story that started with a little thing called the Russian Revolution . . . My point is that these types of subjects always piqued my interest and I always excelled at them.

Not surprisingly, my favourite class in high school was also social studies. I learned about the reunification of Italy and that little French tyrant by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte. First of all, when was Italy *un-unified*, and how did that little man from France dominate the planet as he did? I learned about Europe during the two world wars, and about the history of my own fine country, Canada. It was awesome. It was the unique combination of physical geography—where everything is in relation to everything else—and their socio-political situations that interested me to no end. Plus, in grade ten there was a student teacher that was even cuter than my grade six teacher.

These interests persisted throughout the rest of my life. What began as an interest in countries and history grew into an interest in cultures, societies, and geopolitics. A visit to the Hall of Maps at the Vatican revealed the obvious—the world was indeed thought to be flat at one time. I was constantly asking questions about why things were the way they were. Questions like: Why do some people in Louisiana, or Vietnam, or West Africa speak French? How is it that Rome was home to over a million people at its zenith and so many less after that? How is that the Ptolemy family from Greece ruled over Egypt for centuries? Why did Pakistan and India separate? How could England, a tiny little island in the North Atlantic, rule a massive island, Australia, completely on the other side of the world? How did Islam spread? How did countries form?

I am a questioner. I like to know why; especially when it comes to how things function in society every day. I want to know the history of things. It somehow gives meaning to the present and in so doing provides me a sense of understanding. Without this understanding I feel lost. Not physically lost, but mentally lost. The development of the world I lived in was something that I had to understand better. I needed to know how things fit together and where things came from. That atlas was both my question and my answer.

I am a traveler

As a teenager and into my early twenties I traveled as often as I could, mostly within Canada and the United States. Much of this traveling consisted of what I would call *road trips*. On one particular road trip my friend Daryl and I drove in the middle of the night from Calgary to Vancouver, usually about a ten hour journey high in the Rocky Mountains and on some of Canada's trickiest roads. We were 18-years-old and were not supposed to be on the road at 3:00 AM. Little did Daryl's mom know that he told a small white lie when he told her of his whereabouts during a check-in call. (Sorry Daryl, I hope your mom doesn't get mad about that one. Margie, I'm sorry that you had to read about that here, but after more than twenty years I felt you should know.)

Another great adventure consisted of traveling with Daryl and another of my best friends, Ivica, to Mazatlan, Mexico in 1992. Sure it was all about the beach, and drinking, and meeting girls, and drinking, and then a bit more drinking, but I did learn something significant about myself on that trip: I felt more alive when I was *somewhere else*, somewhere other than *home*. Somewhere else meant I was outside of my comfort zone—and I loved it. As much as I enjoyed partying I enjoyed even more the notion of living outside of my usual space and of experiencing something new. I was like a small child—taking in everything with a sense of wonder and, more importantly, having no fear.

Being *somewhere else* became a critical component of who I was. I didn't know it at the time, but that decision to be somewhere else, specifically at New Year's, would impact my life forever. Mazatlan was the first in a string of ten consecutive New Year's where I was away from home. On occasion it was somewhere close by, like Banff, Alberta, and on other occasions it

was significant, like Cuba. This last location had perhaps the most impact on me because that is where I met my wife.

In November 1995 my friends Ivica and Jim and I were getting our plans together to go to Varadero, Cuba for ten days of fun in the sun around New Year's. We were all excited to get away. We even went to the gym to get all buffed up for the occasion. (As someone who has been six feet tall and 155 pounds since the age of sixteen getting buffed up was merely an exercise in my mind.) We even went for a pre-tan at the suntan studio—that awful, smelly place where you suffocate in a sweat-filled plastic bed and purposefully burn yourself.

Our choice of hotel was what my friend Daryl would call “marginal, at best.” It was, supposedly, a 3-star hotel but I think they stole that last star and pasted it into the travel guides. It was utilitarian; very Fidel Castro. Two twin beds, big enough for one large person or two children, nearly filled the 1960s era room. There was a radio mounted into the counter that was probably used for pumping out communist propaganda in the old days. No TV, no fridge, no nothing. I remember thinking that they probably hoped you got so drunk on the all-inclusive rum that you didn't care where you slept, just as long as it remotely resembled a bed and kept you above the cockroaches scurrying along the floor.

The hotel's patrons were mostly families—moms and dads with kids in their early to late teens. It took a day to sink into my thick skull, but I noticed—or failed to notice—that there were hardly any single women there. No groups of girls, traveling like I was with my boys. No group to match up with, to make things interesting for the rest of our time there. To top it off, it rained for the first two days.

On the third day that all changed. While sitting in the restaurant waiting for our overcooked pizza, which somehow took about an hour and a half to prepare (maybe it had something to do with the proximity to the equator), I noticed two girls I hadn't seen yet. They looked to be in their early twenties and there was no sign of any parents. I was intrigued. I quickly drew the boys' attention to the new arrivals and was met with looks of approval. Things were looking up.

Later that night, while swilling down what seemed like my hundredth rum and coke that day, the same girls arrived at the lounge. I overheard them speaking French so I was a bit concerned. Were they from France or from Quebec? If it was the former, we were likely out of luck because our combined French skills were quite awful. If it was the latter, then there was

a fair chance that they also spoke some English too, and in that case we might at least have someone to talk to. I approached the bar where they were sitting to order some drinks. I went up with the intention of saying hello but couldn't bring myself to do it.

Jim decided moments later that if I didn't have the stones to do it then he would have to take care of it. He confidently stood up and strode over to the bar. Maybe two minutes later he came back alone and meekly sat down, a dejected look on his face. We sat there trying to figure out how much more drunk we'd have to get in order for one of us to actually go try to talk to them. Fortunately we didn't have to do anything after that because they got up and walked right over to our table. They immediately inquired, "Are you guys from Canada?" Well, that was it, we were in. They were Isabelle and Maryse from Montréal, Quebec. We were happy to meet them. Almost ten years later to the day Isabelle and I got married on a beach near Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Maryse stood up for her and Ivica stood up for me on that amazing day. There were a few things that happened in between but I won't bore you with all the details.

My family

My brother Colin was an international traveler. Due to his having a very unique job for several years he was able to travel on business to some far off locales that most folks likely didn't have on their lists of must-see destinations. Being six years younger than him I learned a lot from his adventures and applied what I could when it came time to do my own traveling. Having spent time in Chile, Indonesia, and Vietnam, Colin had some hair-raising experiences that scared me a bit, but also intrigued me. "I'd love to see that!" was a common phrase for me during those faux-trips I would take while looking through his pictures.

Colin, like our grandfather, is a great story-teller and has a very detailed memory, so listening to him and looking at his pictures was just like being there. Okay, it wasn't *exactly* like being there but it was as good as it was going to get. It made me hungry to travel and see more of the world. I didn't want to spend four days on an offshore drilling platform in the South China Sea during a hurricane, but I did want to go to a cheesy bar in Saigon and get hit on by a Vietnamese girl who would tell me that I looked like a movie star.

Where did I get the travel bug from? It had to be that atlas. My parents were not big travelers. When I was very young we would go camping a lot and when I was about five years old we drove from Calgary to Disneyland. I don't remember much from that trip, other than a minor accident I suffered in the trailer that we pulled behind our car. I still bear the scar on my leg where it touched a heat register and sent me into writhing pain on the floor. Even my mom's calming voice and loving kisses couldn't dull the pain of that one. Thankfully, I somehow survived, and from that point forward stayed clear of that heat register.

Our trailer was often parked at campgrounds with plenty of other trailers and campers so it was fun for me to go running around raising hell. On that Disneyland trip I remember one campground in particular. Close by to the small little store at the campground was a playground. There was a swing, teeter-totter, and merry-go-round. One day there was a number of other kids there. My brother Colin was there with me. I remember talking to a bunch of the other kids, feeling secure in the fact that my big brother was close by. At some point, however, I turned to find that Colin was no longer there.

A feeling of absolute fear washed over me. My stomach sank, my heart jumped up into my throat and my ears started to pound with the sound of rushing blood. Was I alone? Shannon was gone too. I was alone with a bunch of other kids, most of whom were bigger than me and, I presumed, much meaner. My adult mind reflects on this as a *holy fuck* moment.

After quickly scanning the scene I spotted my escape route. In between two trailers about fifty feet away there was enough room for me to squeeze through and from there I would be within earshot of my parents' trailer. I decided to make a break for it. I acted very casually with the other kids, stopped talking—which was a challenge for me sometimes—and bolted for the opening. My little legs pumped wildly, my knees coming up around my ears. My tiny little lungs sucked in what air was squeezing past my pursed lips. After what seemed like hours later I reached the gap between the two trailers and shot through the opening like I was launched through the eye of a needle. On the other side I spotted our trailer and turned on the balls of my feet and jetted in that direction. I didn't take the time to turn and look to see who if anyone was pursuing me. As I write this now I realize how silly that must have looked. If I hadn't been telling everyone how tough my big brother was there wouldn't have been a problem I

suppose. Regardless, I was able to make it back safely with no ill effects, other than a slightly bruised ego.

We went to Disneyland a second time when I was almost nine years old, this time on a plane. It was my first time. I wish I could say I remember it in great detail, but I don't. I do know that leading up to that trip I was excited because my brother and sister and I had saved quite a bit of cash, mostly from doing chores around the house, and I wanted to see what I could get with the cash. I remember hanging on tight to the \$50 I had managed to save for my own purchases. There were many things to buy—stuffed animals, t-shirts, Mickey Mouse playing cards—just to name a few. My sister and I would stand in front of the cashier but I could never bring myself to actually buy anything.

I discovered something important about myself on that second trip to Disneyland—I was tight with money. I liked the idea of having it more than the idea of spending it. I didn't care too much; it turned out, about what I *had* but more about what I *saw* and what I *experienced*. This discovery has held true in the now over thirty years since. Without understanding it at the time I had realized that things were just that—*things*. They would come and go, and I did not have a great desire to accumulate anything, except hockey trading cards of course. I was nine after all.

My focus on *experiences* instead of *things* became my *raison de être* for the rest of my life. From that understanding stems my biggest fear: losing my memory. If I lost my memories what would I have left? If I couldn't recall those experiences I treasure so much I would be completely lost. One of the main reasons for writing this book was, in fact, to capture some of those thoughts and experiences and leave some sort of legacy. One day, if I have lost some of my memories, they'll be here, right where I put them.

My parents, Eileen and Neil, were not big travelers. They crossed the Atlantic to Europe a few years *after* I did. Their parents were not big travelers either. They were stay-at-home type of people. They both liked to camp when they were younger and I remember doing that a few times when I was very young. When I was about five years old my parents bought a piece of property at what would become a cottage at a golf course resort just southwest of Calgary. It was nothing more than forest in most places and I remember wondering where we were going to actually live. We lived in a tent-trailer that first summer, along with a tiny two-man

tent outside. The five of us took turns sleeping inside and outside, in what to me was the most remote place on earth at the time.

We worked hard those first two summers, making a house out of nothing. Despite being only five or six years old I made my contributions: carrying rocks for the post holes, gathering nails and screws, carrying lumber, and being the site gopher (go for this, go for that, etc.). I felt more useful than I probably was but I sure was tired at the end of those days. Before I knew it there was a three-bedroom cabin there, up on stilts, with a deck that went all the way around the front and side of the place. Travel after that point in my life consisted of going to the cabin virtually every weekend of every summer for the next ten years. After that there was no real family travel to speak of.

My grandparents, my dad's parents Roy and Miriam, were homesteaders and both grew up living off the land. Travel for them meant going into the city for the afternoon. They worked their way through the great depression and somehow managed to squeak out a living. Neither of them had much experience in the way of travel either, that is until they retired. At the age of seventy-five my grandfather got the itch to do some driving, so he bought a used blue camper van, packed up my grandmother and hit the road. They traveled as nomads for years across Canada and the U.S. before settling down in the early 1980s in Innisfail, Alberta.

My family, then, was not a particularly strong inspiration when it came to traveling. It came down to that atlas and the questions of a young boy trying to figure out how everything worked. There was something inside me that just wanted to explore and see the world—my world—though I often stopped myself from doing it, or even thinking about it.

Could I really live my dream?

In February 2005 Isabelle, at the time my fiancée, attended a particularly inspiring seminar put on by Robin Sharma, author of *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, and other best-selling books. For weeks she talked about it; how it had motivated her to take action on many things in her life. We talked often about some of the things she wanted to accomplish and experience. That was not uncommon for us; we talked almost weekly about life goals, short and long-term objectives and the like. She began to speak with such passion about her desires and goals that something in me

began to move. It was that part of me that I had left alone for many years. I began to think about my own dreams and desires; the things I wanted to do, be, and have. Suddenly, we were both speaking with great passion about the meaning of life and how we wanted more. We wanted to live closer to our dreams.

It was during the following weeks I broached the subject I had put away decades prior: world travel. Though I had traveled plenty over the previous number of years I had not taken the big *world* trip. The thoughts and dreams of that young boy started pouring out of me. I felt an excitement I hadn't felt for many, many years. Isabelle encouraged me to explore the thoughts and feelings that came up. As much as my subconscious tried to put the thoughts away another part of me wanted to explore even more. Could I really do a trip around the world like the nine year-old me wanted to? *Could I really?*

Over the next several weeks we started talking in earnest about a big trip. Since I had known Isabelle we had talked about this kind of thing periodically but usually in a starry-eyed *wouldn't it be great someday if?* kind of way. Both of us realized that we had to make our own *someday* happen; it wouldn't happen on its own.

Several weeks later, on one of our usual drives in Toronto morning traffic on the way to work, something happened. One of those *someday* conversations began and quickly became serious. We tossed around the idea of a world-trip for a while and for the first time made a real effort to consider what we would do, and what the potential consequences would be. Within the span of about five minutes we made a commitment to each other to develop a real plan to travel the world for an extended period. It was April 2005.

Over time our discussions became more and more intense and tangible. We were both at that time looking for more meaning in our lives and it became clear that taking action on our dreams was more important than plodding through day-to-day life hoping that more good things than bad would happen to us. As the discussions persisted it became obvious to me that I *had to* take action. *Had to*; as in, there were no other options. It was the kind of thing that could not be retracted or softened. The possibility of a world trip may only ever happen once in a lifetime (though I hoped that would not be true) so we wanted to commit ourselves to something grand.

It was one thing to talk about and conceptualize but quite another to plan and actually execute on a trip around the world. The first thing that we discussed was the question of whether we would keep the house and car or go all out and sell everything. What prompted that was my awareness that in the sparse world-trip travel literature the only stories that seemed to be available were those of people who had decided to sell it all in order to live their dreams. They literally had to sell the farm in an effort to live the life of a nomad, at least for a period of time. This usually involved selling most or all of their worldly possessions in order to be able to afford said adventure.

Isabelle and I decided right then that we absolutely would *not* sell the house. Other things maybe, but under no circumstances would the house go on the market. We had worked too hard to get to that point and we did not want to lose it all. It was funny; both of us had seemingly equal forces within us that screamed simultaneously for both adventure and security. We wanted the trip but we wanted our house to come back to. With the house question put to rest we moved on to other potential roadblocks in the plan.

The second thing we did was brainstorm on potential time away from work. Imagine that; our goal was to travel the world, take action on our dreams, and live a meaningful life, and one of the first considerations was how long we could get off work. Sadly, there were realities in life that needed to be managed and that was certainly one of them. We were both relatively early in our careers and it was a challenge determining what was more important, the dream or the job.

The driving force then was how many months we could get away from work. The bigger question was actually whether we could get time off *at all*. The question arose as to whether we would have to give up our jobs in order to live our dreams. That was a slap in the face; the stark reality that everything we had built up over the years may go down the drain in the name of truly living. The alternative was *living*—going through the motions and having life dictate what was going to happen. Could we give up our jobs if we had to? That question rolled around in my head for months afterward. Eventually we decided that yes, in fact, we were ready to let go of our jobs if we had to.

That decision shook me to my core. I was ready to give up my job in order to go on a trip. Was I being juvenile? What would people think? Did I care what people would think? Wouldn't most people applaud,

rather than condemn? Both Isabelle and I had very supportive families and friends so I wasn't worried about that. I was somehow worried about *them*—those people I didn't know and never would know—they were the ones whose opinions I was worried about. What an ass I was being! The decision was mine, actually ours, and the consequences would be borne by nobody else. That realization cemented my belief that I was doing the right thing.

The question of how long to go for still remained. Was it to be three months, four, or maybe more? Somehow our reasonableness kicked in and suddenly we were focused on four months; an amount of time we both thought we could get off work and also be able to reasonably afford. We targeted September of 2006 as the departure date. From that decision point we worked on the financials.

Planning such an adventure really made me think about money. How important was it? What is money really for? It occurred to me that I held a tremendous amount of fear about money. I didn't want too much due to the issues that came with it; greed primary among them. I didn't want too little either. The scarcity mentality influenced most of my feelings toward money my entire life. What did it all mean? How much did I really need; for both the trip and for life in general? How much would we need to survive for four months without knowing where we were going or what we were going to do?

The easy part about determining the budget was the understanding that we lived our normal lives doing the exact same thing: spending money. There was food, shelter, activities, transportation, and the like to consider. Figuring out how much we spent on these things in our *normal* lives was the first part and established the baseline. After that we took some wild-ass guesses. How much would it cost for accommodations in Africa? How much would food cost in India? Fortunately we had traveled on many other occasions previously so it wasn't a total guess. I started a small Excel spreadsheet and made a few entries based on daily amounts and suddenly we were coming up with some rough numbers. It was June 2005.

Sitting at the kitchen table in our modest Toronto home on weekends we would continue to refine the numbers and make what were then more educated guesses on costs. It was around that time we also started considering where we would go. I was full of ideas, as I had been for nearly thirty years: Egypt, India, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, South Africa, China, Peru,

Brazil . . . too many to count. How reasonable was it? It didn't matter; we knew we would somehow afford a four-month trip around the world.

Life is not a dress rehearsal

In the words of my favourite heavy metal rock band as a teenager, Iron Maiden:

*Now you see me, now you don't.
Break the walls, I'm coming out.
I'm not a prisoner, I'm a free man,
And my blood is my own now.*

Alright, they are still my favourite heavy metal rock band, over 25 years later. Was that so bad? The reason these lines from *The Prisoner* resonated with me was that I felt the decision to take the world trip represented an emancipation of sorts from my existing life: the prison, if you will. For years I had felt I was somehow constrained; frozen, unable to move, unable to break free. I always had that nagging feeling that I somehow put the dreams of that nine-year-old boy on hold, and for what reason I had absolutely no idea.

My inner voice had been telling me that I didn't have the money. It was telling me that I needed to establish myself—my career, my house, and my other assets. I was *supposed* to settle down. I didn't have time to go gallivanting around the world and wasting time. I needed to stick to the traditional plan. What was the *plan* anyway? And who told me I needed to follow it?

Finally I realized that it was me—and my own limiting beliefs—that made me think the traditional plan was a good one. That rather lucid—and unfortunately rare—moment of realization changed everything. My inner voice started saying different things to me. It wasn't talking about fear and limitation, it was talking about anger. It was saying something very basic: You're such an idiot; just go do it! What's stopping you? As Robin Sharma often said, "Life is not a dress rehearsal." That was it! That encapsulated it all: *Life is not a dress rehearsal*. What was I waiting for? What was I *practicing* for? My life was only the present moment, not the past and not the future. Robin often also said, "As you live your days, so you live your

life.” How was I living my days? Most decidedly not the way I wanted to. I was, rather suddenly, a free man.

That type of mental shift was what metaphysics calls a quantum moment. It was a shift in my thinking, and it happened over a fraction of a second. From that moment forward nothing was the same. Fundamental changes took place and I had absolutely no choice but to go on with my new way of thinking. Malcolm Gladwell refers to the shift, or moment, in his best-selling book *Blink!* He talks about how our unconscious makes decisions for us without us knowing it. That was precisely what happened to me. The voice that had for years been telling me not to be frivolous and not to deviate from my self-imposed plan suddenly fell silent. My thoughts were then my own and my mind could conceive of nothing else but *the trip*.

Weddings and other scary things

Having done the math and laid the foundation mentally, we were on our way to doing a trip around the world. The money required for the trip was being directed on a bi-weekly basis into various accounts and we tracked our progress very closely.

In the fall of 2005 we were putting plans together to get married in Mexico. After nearly seven years together Isabelle and I were going to get married where our relationship began: Playa del Carmen. We had chosen a resort in the Mayan Riviera and invited only our immediate families and close friends. We knew it would be a challenge for many of our guests to make it but we did what we wanted to do and what was right for us. Unfortunately, in October that year Hurricane Wilma tore through Cancun and the Mayan Riviera and threw a bit of a wrench into our plans.

In her wake Wilma left virtually nothing, especially in Cancun and the areas just south. The resort we had selected was just north of Playa del Carmen, and it got hit badly. Throughout the month of November we sat and waited for word on the damage and when our resort would re-open. We were getting mixed messages from our travel agent, from the resort itself, and from the TV news. Too much hung in the balance and the damage seemed to be significant. The first proposed re-opening date was pushed back. A few days later that date was pushed back again.

The opening date was then to be the day before we arrived. That was too close.

After a handful of sleepless nights and a few tears we decided to move to a different resort. We chose a resort that did not sustain as much damage and was opening much sooner than our first choice. Amazingly, the one we ended up at—Secrets Capri—was really our first choice from the beginning but we ended up going with another one to save our guests a few hundred dollars. The Capri was only moderately damaged and, fortunately, our guests were able to switch their reservations.

During that time the topic of the world trip did not enter our discussions. The wedding talk dominated everything—as expected. We continued to quietly save and just kept on plugging away at our lives. Despite the crisis that Wilma had caused the wedding went off perfectly and was an absolute dream. Upon returning home we settled into our married life—which was strikingly similar to our un-married life.

In February 2005 Isabelle met an enlightened leader named Jaime Jaramillo at the aforementioned Robin Sharma seminar, the very same seminar that started our push toward living the lives we wanted. Jaime is the well-known founder of a children's foundation in Colombia called Niños de los Andes (Children of the Andes). Isabelle had established a rapport and connection with him and his cause tugged at her heart strings. His story, his foundation, and his message made me want to learn more. In the fall of 2006 Isabelle and I talked about going to visit Jaime to see what magic he was weaving in the dark streets of Bogotá.

To say that we received some backlash over this plan would be an understatement. “What?!” and “Why the hell (and worse) would you ever want to go there?” were common questions. My brother Colin, who's colleague had lived and worked in South America for the better part of two decades—and who spoke perfect Spanish—highly advised against it. “Dave would never go there,” was his advice. As if the news in the press wasn't enough I had to deal with a jittery family. Colin was, as I have already mentioned, very well-traveled and if he was concerned then I was concerned.

I studied the current situation in Bogotá, as much as I could from afar. The Internet had lots of stories but I was discovering that the stories were, for lack of a better term, ancient history. From what I could muster it appeared that over the course of the administration of President Alvaro

Uribe the dangerous forces of the drug trade and the left-wing insurgents had been, at least to some degree, subdued. Security—the Achilles heel of the tourism industry for over three decades in Colombia—seemed to be under control.

Naïve comments from friends and co-workers alike did not dissuade me, although it planted a seed of doubt that I had never had before. In all of my travels up to that point in my life I had never been nervous before getting on a plane. Actually I was nervous once, when my aforementioned friend Daryl took me in a single-engine Cessna for his first solo flight as a newly minted pilot. Then, I was scared shitless.

The first sign that we were out of our normal element was when we had just touched down on the tarmac in Bogotá. That was the moment when a typically pleasant sounding voice came over the public address system and reminded passengers to stay in their seats until the plane had to come to a *full and complete* stop. I've never really understood what the difference was between *full and complete* stop and just *stop* but our plane was neither. It had literally *just* touched down when virtually everyone on board jumped up out of their seats like someone had just scored an overtime goal and started ripping their bags out of the overhead compartment. There was no concern about items having shifted in flight.

"What the hell is going on?" I said out loud.

"We haven't arrived at the gate yet, what's happening?" Isabelle echoed.

Obviously things were different there and that was the first sign. The crew immediately materialized in the aisles and demanded that everyone sit down—to no avail. Even the old lady clear across the plane with the platform shoes and granny sweater popped up out of her seat, snatched her bag from under the seat in front of her and was making her way down the aisle toward the exit. Given that the plane was still moving at a few hundred miles an hour I was more than happy to stay seated. I suppose Isabelle and I really stood out as we contently sat there, all buckled up with our hands in our laps. Welcome to Colombia.

We had chosen to stay at Casa Medina, a classic hotel and an institution in Bogotá. We chose it for its central location and its implied security. We chose well; it was excellent. The water in the bathtub drained a bit slowly, but otherwise it was excellent.

"Is it safe to walk that far?" I asked the ever-smiling Carlos at the hotel's front desk; inquiring about the bus station we intended to walk to.

“Oh yes, it’s no problem,” he replied.

His colleague Vivian furrowed her brow as if to imply that we were both crazy.

“Don’t you think it’s safe?” I asked her.

“It’s about twenty blocks—that’s a long way,” she responded in broken English.

I then realized she was more concerned about the exertion required—the high altitude could make breathing a real challenge—than our physical safety. Her eyes said to me: Why on earth would you want to walk such a long distance when you can take a cab, you crazy tourists?

Bogotá, like many large, third-world cities, had many upscale, beautiful areas and many dark, dirty, and dangerous areas. Generally speaking the south side of Bogotá was an area to be avoided, specifically the locality of Ciudad Bolívar, one of the most densely populated urban sprawls on earth. Over the years the population there had expanded, and so had the slums and they continued to creep up higher and higher into the hills overlooking the city.

The FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, the largest guerilla army in Colombia; one that had been fighting the government for over 40 years) and other terrorist factions had essentially run the streets in Ciudad Bolívar and other neighbourhoods for many years. Tourists simply did not go to these areas, and neither did most people in Bogotá that didn’t have to. In fact, tourists generally *could not* go to these areas. Even if supported by guides they simply couldn’t gain access because they couldn’t get past the various check-points of gun-wielding militia. That was the case unless, of course, your guide happened to be Jaime Jaramillo.

Jaime, affectionately referred to as Papá Jaime, was the first person I had ever met who’s light I could actually *see*; it streamed out of him and engulfed me with warmth I had never experienced. His deep, dark brown eyes penetrated right into me and I found myself unable to look away from him. He was of medium height and build in his late forties with greying hair and sporting a thick moustache. He wore jeans and a collared shirt, the top two buttons undone; he could have melted butter he looked so relaxed. I saw immediately what Isabelle saw—an enlightened being. He was someone who had transcended his ego and radiated—literally *radiated*—warmth and light. How could such a gentle being manage life in such a dangerous environment? I would soon find out.

Jaime was well known in Colombia not only for his foundation, but also for his skills as a peace broker. His name and his disarming demeanor enabled us to penetrate deep into one of the most dangerous places in Bogotá; all so that we could deliver Christmas dinner and gifts to hundreds of desperately needy children. Seeing the faces of those children light up as we gave them a much needed meal and likely the only Christmas present they were going to receive pulled my heart out of my chest and made me shake. It was all I could do to not break down completely and bawl my eyes out. I would never take such things as Christmas presents for granted ever again.

In a most graceful and effortless way Jaime showed me what impact a single man could have on a city, a country, and a continent. His tireless work had saved literally thousands of children from certain death in the rancid sewers of the city and given them hope for a better life. (His stories about some of these amazing children can be found in his book *Children of the Darkness*.) Meeting Jaime and watching him work emboldened my belief that I must give back to the world in any way possible.

I knew from then on that my around-the-world adventure would include time spent giving back. I didn't know when or where or in what form that would take but that didn't matter. I was confident that it was going to work out just fine. It always did.

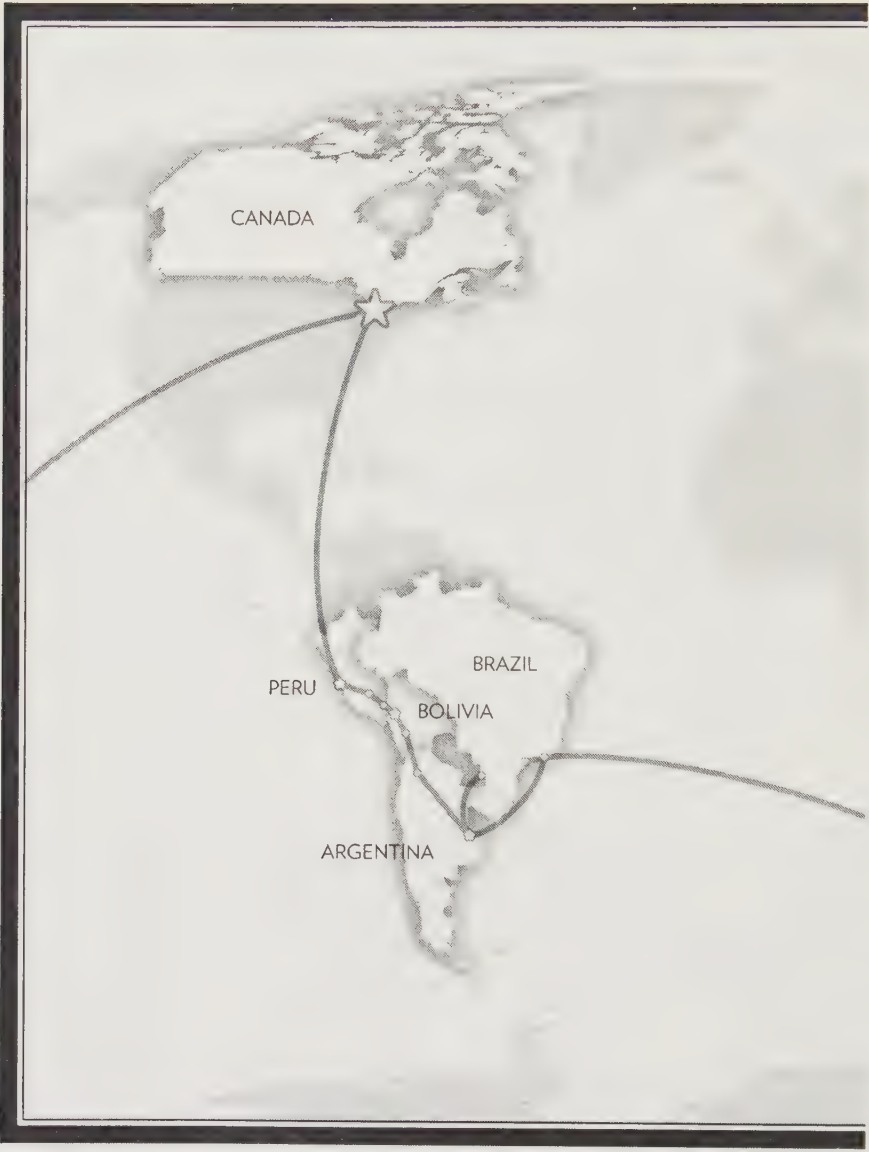
Counting down

In the spring of 2006 we decided that we were not quite ready for a world trip in September. We realized that it was too soon and it felt rushed. One thing I did not want to do was rush into something that large and that important. The target departure date then became the spring of 2007. That gave us more time to save and more time to feel comfortable with the impact it was sure to have on us.

In the summer of 2006 something interesting happened at Isabelle's work. A job promotion was handed to her that she could not refuse so our plans changed yet again. As part of Isabelle accepting the job offer a five-month leave of absence was negotiated. The new target for departure was January 2008.

I had no specific vision of what I was going to see, experience, or feel on the trip but after decades of thinking about it, and a couple of years

planning for it, I was excited and ready to go. I thought it was important to go into it with an open mind, open heart, and a clean slate. One thing I recognized, but had not fully explored emotionally, was that I was not that nine-year-old boy, mesmerized by that atlas. Nor was I that young adult, wishing he had done something similar years before. I was a 36-year-old married man with a career and a mortgage. I was heading out on a detour of epic proportions to explore *my* world.





South America

Peru—Pathway to the stars

The second day of 2008 was bitterly cold in Toronto and I was looking forward to some warmer weather. From the minute I got on the plane I began wondering what things I might see and pondered how my inner world might be affected. Even though I had no previously set expectations as soon as I sat down on that plane my mind started to race. Was I going to be changed by all this? How could I not be changed by this? Would my relationship with Isabelle be changed? Would I have the same outlook on the world, and my place in it? Nervous energy screamed through my body, making me twitchy and hot. I was uncomfortable so I knew what was about to happen was good, and right.

Lima

We arrived in Lima about an hour late in the middle of the night. I had slept for an hour and a half along the way, at most. That was after three straight late nights following long days getting ready to leave. Preparing for the trip was one thing but preparing the house for our renters was another. To top it off we had both picked up head colds a few days prior so we were constantly sniffing, blowing our noses, and coughing.

Our first day in Lima was like a foggy haze. Not so much because the sky was so, but because we slept all morning and the only thing we managed to do was go to the grocery store and pick up a few things to make lunch. After that we napped for another two hours. We headed back

to the grocery store again to pick up some noodles for dinner and after dinner went to bed again. *Was the whole trip going to be this way?*

Lilian, the owner of the B&B where we stayed, tried to get us to do things and offered all sorts of advice. She was a woman of tremendous energy and her slight frame and glowing face indicated she had taken good care of herself for many years. She was hard to turn down but we simply didn't have the energy to do anything. The most I could muster was to push down the shoot button on my camera a few times in order to capture the sun setting on the bay.

The next day was much the same—slow, lethargic movements coupled with a penchant for napping. We managed to get up for a late breakfast and shared it with another couple staying at the B&B. They were from Chicago and engaged us rather quickly in a discussion about Machu Picchu. (I discovered later in the trip that any traveler in South America was either going to do the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu or had already done it and wanted to share their wisdom with you, regardless of how interested you may look in hearing about it.) They had just completed the four-day trek and were off to Bolivia soon. The man, a hulking early-twenties athletic type, shared with us the struggles he faced the moment he stepped off the plane in Cuzco. He never acclimated to the altitude—3,380 metres above sea level—and it only got worse as he trekked even higher on the Inca Trail. It was a bit worrying to see that such a young and obviously athletic young man had a hard time with the trek. He called it the most demanding physical experience of his life. His girlfriend, who could not have been much more than five foot three and about 105 pounds, on the other hand, had no problems whatsoever. The thing we would later learn about altitude sickness is that it affects everyone differently and rarely has anything to do with a person's body type, age, or overall fitness. Thankfully we had thought ahead and got altitude sickness pills before we left Canada and were ready to start taking them right away.

We headed out for a brief visit to Plaza San Martin, which sat at the nexus of several busy streets and was amazingly calming despite the incessant noise going on all around it. From there we walked to the real center of Lima, Plaza de Armas. There lies the governor's palace, guarded by men with machine guns and a few army tanks—not exactly a warm and fuzzy vision for tourists. La Catedral de Lima, the city's main cathedral, is also there, along with the bronze fountain that has stood vigil here since 1650. As I looked around I saw a number of other tourists flipping through

their travel guides and snapping pictures. That was somehow comforting to us both as we had heard, as recently as at the Toronto airport, that Lima was a dangerous place and thieves were *everywhere*.

"It's nice to see other tourists, isn't it?" I commented. "Remember in Bogotá, we seemed to be the only tourists? It's good to not be alone."

Isabelle glanced around at the other young couples trying to get their bearings. With a smirk on her face she replied "Yes, it's good that we're not the only ones looking lost."

One of Lima's main attractions is San Francisco Monastery. Consecrated in 1673, it is one of the city's greatest colonial structures and one of a few that has withstood the many earthquakes that have hit Lima in the past few hundred years. Our guide, a young Peruvian with a decidedly French name, Jean-Paul, spoke surprisingly good English and obviously loved what he was doing. His descriptions were not only detailed but were spoken with deep passion and respect.

"This kid seems to really love what he's doing. Can you remember getting a tour like this where the guide actually cared so much? This guy is a real student of history," I said to Isabelle. As a student of history myself I really connected with the young man and his detailed commentary.

Dinner that night was at a rather non-descript restaurant near the B&B called Sabor y Tradición. We each had an excellent plate of BBQ chicken and were thoroughly entertained by our server, Arturo. He spoke no English but he reminded me very much of Mr. Bean, the whacky sketch comic from England. He had a goofy smile throughout the evening no matter what was going on and because he did not speak English he tended to make funny noises to let us know what he was trying to communicate. It was good food and an entertaining evening. We had only two days in Lima but it was, as many travel guides suggested, enough to get a flavour for the place and enough to simply get on the time zone and get ready for Cuzco and Machu Picchu.

Cuzco

After arriving in Cuzco my thoughts were focused on the Inca trail. *How difficult was it going to be, really?* I had heard stories of big, strong men crumpling like paper houses when ascending the mountains, specifically Dead Woman's Pass. Conversely I had heard of elderly ladies managing it just fine. *Was I ready for this?* I hadn't done a lot in the way of preparation,

other than going on fairly easy walks in and Toronto and area in October and November. The only way to know how my body was going to react to the altitude and the trail was to just do it.

Walking around in Cuzco that first day I could feel the difference the thin air had in my lungs. It was subtle but it was there. Walking up the narrow cobblestone streets to our hostel, the Niños Hotel, took my breath away, literally. The labyrinth of streets was confusing at first, and I'm sure they had stymied many a visitor in the past. Thankfully the air was cool and refreshing. Had it not been I'm sure I would have been sweating profusely, and probably bitching about it, too. Isabelle seemed to have no problems. The thin air wasn't enough to slow me down to any real extent but my heart was definitely working harder than normal. I just kept thinking to myself how happy I was that we decided to spend two days there before starting the trail, per the advice we had read on many websites and in several major guidebooks. We were at the beginning of a very long trip so there was nothing to be gained by cutting short the acclimatization period. I was not going to be a hero and rush up the trail only to spend four days feeling awful. A hot cup of coca tea helped me adapt to the altitude and I would end up drinking several cups a day for the next week. Coca tea was something the locals always advised drinking to help with the altitude, and it didn't taste half-bad either.

Isabelle and I enjoyed the relative peace and quiet of strolling through the streets of Cuzco. Rainy season was upon the region so the streets were only sparsely populated with tourists. The city had an old colonial feel to it yet I knew I was in an impoverished nation at the same time. Street vendors offered us water, gum, and other conveniences yet at the same time homeless people were abound and hawkers appeared out of nowhere once we slowed to look at anything. Slow season also made us stand out like beacons of light on a dark night and we became magnets for sellers with toques, paintings, children's toys, food, camera film (do people still use *film*?), and countless other things. This was not unexpected of course, but having a nice casual stroll while being left alone was most certainly more appealing.

The central market of Cuzco was a massive old building that looked as though it may collapse at any moment. It was open to the outdoors and had several very busy entrances. Inside, surprisingly dark, were vendors of all sorts: clothing racks stood next to vases of beautiful blooming flowers, which stood next to tables of raw fish and meat. Children scurried through

the aisles and small Peruvian women crouched next to their goods, shoveling food into their mouths quickly so as to not miss any potential passing customers. The smells jolted my nostrils and momentarily made me nauseous. To my surprise we seemed to be the only tourists in the market. That said our presence hardly caused a stir at all. It was rather a calming feeling knowing we were, for the most part, being ignored.

Isabelle was drawn almost immediately to the aisle with the only things that smelled good: the flowers. Had I not been there to ask her the obvious question, "Where would you put all those flowers?" she would have bought them all. Amongst the frenetic shuffling of feet and loud voices bargaining over absolutely everything I spotted two little girls playing on the ground. They couldn't have been more than four years old, both wearing their black hair in ponytails. Their dark eyes were bright with youth and their dirty yet smiling faces pulled at my heartstrings. I smiled like a wanton father when one turned and spotted me. She gave me an ear to ear grin and then scooted outside, the other following quickly behind. *Where was their mother or father? I kept thinking: I sure hope they have parents.*

The streets were full of children; begging, picking up scraps from the road, trying to sell trinkets to passers-by. Young, innocent faces stared at me as I walked past. *How is this possible? Why are so many very young children on the streets like this?* My heart dropped and my stomach tightened as I watched them. I knew there would be poverty here but I did not expect it to be this pronounced nor did I expect to see so many very young children at the fore of it.

The central hub of Cuzco is Plaza de Armas, the city's main plaza and for centuries its primary meeting place. The stunning main cathedral and Church of La Compañía both open directly onto the plaza, which is also strewn with benches and various nooks and crannies for sitting and taking in the ambiance. Many a proclamation, uprising, and religious event had taken place there over hundreds of years. The views to the mountains were spectacular. Isabelle and I found an unoccupied bench and talked about our upcoming adventure to Machu Picchu.

"Did we do enough training?" she asked.

"I think we'll be alright," I said with as much confidence as I could muster. "We're doing the right thing by acclimating here. We've done several marathons so we should be able to hike for a few days."

She looked at me, still a little unsure. "I hope so."

Just then we were approached by a young boy, perhaps ten or eleven years old. He came to us with a big, toothy smile on his face and what appeared to be small drawings or paintings in his hand.

"Hello," he said.

"Hola," I said in return.

"Can I interest you in some of my paintings? I've done them myself; let me show you."

Before we had a chance to respond he began to show us a series of small paintings that were clearly mass produced.

"These are a very good price."

"We're not really interested in paintings, but thanks," I said, trying to be gentle.

"Where are you from?"

"We're from Canada," Isabelle responded.

"Oh, Canada, that's a nice place. Would you like to see more of my paintings?"

"No, thanks," I interjected. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I go to school sometimes," he said, looking back at his paintings and trying to avoid the subject. "I can sell you these cheap."

I realized I needed to be a little more forceful: "We've told you several times now that we are not interested, but thanks. We're just trying to enjoy the plaza and talk. Thanks for coming by."

Before the boy had a chance to say anything further another boy, perhaps eight years old, materialized and asked if I would like a shoe shine. I looked down at my sandals and replied "I don't have shoes to shine."

"I shine for you," he replied in broken English.

"I'm wearing sandals so there is nothing to shine."

"I shine for you," he repeated. He looked at me with wide, puppy dog eyes.

"I wish I could help you, my friend, but my sandals don't need shining right now."

As I looked up I saw a young girl, maybe six years old, standing in front of Isabelle. I thought to myself that maybe there was some kind of strategy here to break us down. They send in the older kid first, the one who speaks pretty good English, and then they send progressively younger ones at you, getting cuter as they go. The sweet and adorable little girl offered colourful finger puppets, cheap of course.

At that point I was feeling a bit too crowded and needed some space. “Sweetie, why don’t we head over there,” I said, motioning to the other side of the plaza. Isabelle read my eyes and knew that it was time to go.

“Goodbye and good luck,” she said to the now large crowd of children gathered by our bench. We walked swiftly away.

“What just happened there? Within minutes we had three kids offering us stuff and they just kept coming. I really didn’t need my sandals polished.”

“Well, we are in the main square,” Isabelle replied.

“Good point. I wish we could help them but buying their trinkets won’t help them very much. It’s sad to see these little cuties out here having to do this.”

Later we stopped for a coffee and tea at a coffee shop called, not surprisingly, Inka Café. It was strange to be going out for a coffee for the first time on the trip. We had spent so many Saturday and Sunday afternoons over the previous two and a half years going out for coffee in Toronto to talk about the trip that it seemed odd to be going out for coffee *on* the trip. Here we began to explore the ultimate question: Why are we doing this trip, anyway?

“I can’t quite articulate it,” I said. “We’ve been running around like crazy people for a long time and I know I feel a bit disconnected and a bit off purpose. Plus, we’ve been sick for the past several days, and that doesn’t help. I’m trying to settle into my *travel-self*, something I’ve never been before. We’re starting the Inca Trail tomorrow. Maybe right now isn’t the time to force ourselves to answer this question.” I wasn’t sure what kind of reaction that would elicit but, to my relief, she agreed.

“Okay, Sweetie, let’s not force it.”

The Inca Trail

“I can’t believe they call this a road,” I said to Isabelle, and anyone else who cared to listen, as we rumbled and jerked down the path in our bus. Some of the others in our 15-person trekking group were bouncing around like me and others somehow managed to nod off to sleep. We were on our way from Cuzco to the start of the trek at Kilometer 82 in the Sacred Valley, passing through what I could only assume were towns, though they bore minimal resemblance to what I was accustomed to seeing in towns—things like telephone poles, asphalt roads, meridians, a main

street with a post office and grocery store. A few ramshackle buildings struggling to stay upright lined this so-called road and children tending livestock and mules attempted to get out of the way of our lumbering bus as we bounced along. It seemed cattle and people were always on the road and neither made a great effort to get out of the way. At one point we stopped for several minutes as a boy tried valiantly to direct the cow he was tending off the road by using a thin tree branch and spindly rope tied around the beast's neck.

Upon arriving at our stop we were greeted by hawkers selling everything from bananas to sun screen to walking sticks. Ladies, likely in their thirties, looked to be in their fifties as their dark, wrinkled skin hung from impoverished faces. Children carried boxes of water and potato chips from person to person hoping to make a last minute sale. We were joined by several other groups who also swam through the hawkers to get to their equipment and get loaded for the trek. Noting the number of offloading groups I started doing the math and realized there were at least one hundred trekkers there. I was thankful that the government had limited the number of permits they issued for the trail to five hundred per day. I couldn't imagine it being much busier and if it were I think it would have been entirely too congested and rather not enjoyable.

Day One was a gradual uphill trek for about 16 kilometres from 2,400 metres to 3,300 metres above sea level. The pace was quick to start. I tried to keep up to Isabelle with an almost jogging step at first. "What's the hurry?" I asked. "I'm just trying to keep up with everyone," she replied. I felt a bit like a contestant on the first day of the reality shows *Amazing Race* or *Survivor*, trying to eye-up the others and figure them out based on their appearance and mannerisms. Unfortunately the more I analyzed the further I fell behind. Forget it, I told myself. *Just keep your legs moving and figure everything else out later.* As I walked and took in my immediate surroundings I was somehow surprised by the sheer number of traditional Peruvian farming families on either side of the trail going about their daily lives, hauling their stubborn donkeys around as they deposited a thick layer of slick and soupy dung on the path just ahead of me.

It wasn't until the first lunch break that I got a chance to really meet my fellow trekkers. We had all met the night before at the trekking company office but that was very brief and we were really there to learn how this was all going to work. It was at lunch, in a make-shift camp set up by the porters that carried the tents and food, that I had a chance to meet a few

people. Two fellow Canadians were along for the adventure; Jason and Kelly from Medicine Hat, Alberta. *That's comforting. It'll be nice having two people from close to home.* Other trekkers included Tom and Nick from England; Niko and Alejandro from Argentina; Nicole and Marcus from Austria; Mary from Colorado; Katie from Chicago; Sam from L.A.; and Jorge from Peru and Anita from France, now living together in Montréal. Our guide was Javier, an exceedingly affable Peruvian in his early thirties and his second in charge Banderas, a wise looking character in his late forties.

Enabling this whole thing were about twenty porters, each carrying over forty pounds of equipment, materials, and packs. Some were no taller than five foot three but they were amazingly strong and could move like the wind, often with no shoes or wearing just sandals. After starting long after us they would quickly catch up, pass us, and go ahead to set up camp. Amazingly, they would break down camp and leapfrog us again to set up camp for the night.

At the end of the first day I was spent, and happy to get to bed. It wasn't until morning that I saw where we had set up camp and my jaw dropped as I unzipped the tent to take in breathtaking views of a mountain valley in the early morning light.

Day Two is traditionally the most difficult of the four days on the Inca Trail. The morning required that we ascend 900 metres in altitude, mostly straight up. "Holy shit, that's a lot of steps," I said to Isabelle, trying not to sound like I was whining, or afraid. After over two hours of switch-backing near-vertical steps up the mountain, I kept wondering when the hell they were going to end. Off to my right the sound of brush and grass rustling and a cackling sound scared the crap out of me. Isabelle was up ahead, as always, and I stopped dead in my tracks face to face, actually face to neck, with an enormous white llama. Llamas, up close, were downright frightening and I wanted nothing to do with that one. It eyed me up and down, rather indifferently, and spun the other way, thankfully, as I scurried up the next half-dozen steps, firing what I thought were tired legs in a feeble attempt to get out of range. As I looked back I saw the llama meet up with his friends and scamper down the hill away from the trail.

We were told it was going to be hard but I never expected to develop a hatred for steps. "How much longer is this going to be? We must be getting close to Dead Woman's Pass by now," I offered with a hopeful tone.

“Let’s take a short break,” Isabelle mercifully proposed.

As we sat on a rock outcropping eating bananas and drinking water two young Australian hikers went blazing past. “Young bastards,” I said once they were out of earshot. Not far behind them was their group of other young and chatty people. My competitive side told me to get up and not let them past. “Let’s get going,” I said to Isabelle. Her slightly surprised look went away once she realized we were being followed by this other group. It’s funny, Javier told us from the very beginning to walk at our own pace and not worry about anyone else but here we were worrying about being passed.

Finally at the top of Dead Woman’s Pass, so named for the outline profile of the pass against the sky, we finally took a break. We were at an altitude of 4,215 metres, the highest point on the Inca Trail, and it was cold. The wind stabbed at my sweaty body like hundreds of tiny knives. I could only enjoy the scene for a few minutes and refuel with a granola bar for the descent on the other side.

Slick steps for 600 metres virtually straight down pounded my knees but it was somehow a more enjoyable experience than the 900 metres coming up the other side. Regardless, the most difficult part of the trail was behind us and nobody was happier about it than me. Actually, nobody was happier about it than Kelly, who had been stricken with altitude sickness and gallantly made her way over the pass and arrived at the camp hours behind the rest of us. She showed a lot of fortitude to make it that far and made my Canadian pride swell a little bit.

We rested in our tent at the end of the second day on the trail. We waited for dinner, prepared by the head chef Tongo, and looked out our tent over the snow-capped Andes in the distance. The white peaks glowed light blue in the fading light of the early evening. I wasn’t completely exhausted but I was starting to feel the effects of the past two days. Other than running marathons I don’t think I’d exerted myself that much in the previous ten years.

The bathroom facility there, if you cared to call it that (I preferred to call it a few holes in the ground with a few walls around them), was about a 200-metre walk from the campsite. At night it was impossible to get there without a flashlight. Javier, our jovial guide, decided to recount one of his more harrowing experiences at that campsite, and it referred to the bathroom.

“One night someone tried to get to the washroom without a flashlight. In the middle of the night I could just make out the sound of a woman yelling for help. I sat up in my tent and listened carefully and heard that it was coming from the direction of the washroom. I grabbed my flashlight and headed over there right away. I found one of the ladies from our group in one of the stalls, afraid to come back to the site because it was so dark. I led her out and back to her tent. The next morning her boyfriend started looking at me funny. I guess his girlfriend had told him what happened but he was a little suspicious when she turned up in the middle of the night with me at the tent. Anyway, he later started accusing me of messing around with his girlfriend. I tried to explain that I only helped her come back from the washroom and that was it.

“The next day I accidentally overheard them talking in their tent and he was getting really upset.” That’s when I cut him off. “You accidentally overheard them? How can you *accidentally* overhear them?” The whole group sitting around the dinner table erupted in laughter. Javier conceded, with a sly smile and blinking of his eyes, that he may have been listening to them, and continued to tell his story: “The guy was being a real jerk but eventually his girlfriend calmed him down. He didn’t talk to me the rest of the trek!” Again we all burst out laughing. My guess was that he had at least a hundred stories about the groups he has led on the Inca Trail. I could only imagine what stories he would tell about us to future groups.

The rain was pouring down the morning of Day Three. It was a short trekking day but it was a wet one. As the group emerged from their grey coloured tents they donned their brightly coloured rain jackets. Heading off down the trail Isabelle and I wondered how the day was going to unfold. Isabelle, in her purple rain jacket, looked as cute as ever. Given her wide smile you would never know that the sky was cloudy grey and the rain was pouring down in heavy, sloppy, drops—the kind of drops that, when they hit the top of my head, felt like a jackhammer, rattling my brain incessantly. I grabbed my walking stick and headed off into the driving rain.

As luck would have it the jackhammer rain began to fade. It was, however, very humid, thus making the rain jacket rather useless as I sweat enough to make my body drip with perspiration. After only a few hours of moderate walking we ended at the last stop before heading to Machu Picchu. Upon arrival we peeled off our wet clothes and laid them in the sun, which appeared briefly over the deep green mountain tops. We

settled into a relaxed afternoon of sitting around and playing cards. The Brits introduced us to a new card game called *Shithead*. As I watched the Brits, the Argentineans, Javier, and Banderas play I realize the game had many similarities to a game we Canadians are familiar with called *Asshole* so Jason and I showed them all how to play it. We had a great time and Javier, despite playing like a rookie, kicked our asses.

After dinner we thanked the porters for their amazing efforts in a brief ceremony headed by Javier. After that Katie brought out her hula hoop, which she religiously brought with her everywhere she went, and had a little hula competition. Banderas was awesome and put the rest of us, especially me, to shame. Despite wanting to stay up a bit later and have some fun we decided to head back to our tent and get some rest before the final push the next day.

Day Four started at 4:00 AM with an unwelcomed tent-rattling. The gate to the park opened at 5:30 AM so we lined up right after breakfast with our group and all of the other trekkers on the trail. The nervous energy buzzed and it reminded me of the beginning of a marathon. Everyone jockeyed for position before the park opened and people started flooding through the narrow gate when it did, onto the even narrower trail. It was a frenzied atmosphere as slower trekkers were simply passed, sometimes aggressively, by faster ones. It didn't matter what group you belonged to at that point, although the guides tried to keep everyone together. It was every man and woman for him or herself. The race to the Sun Gate was on before the sun even came up.

I picked up the pace so as not to be passed. It was about a two-hour trek but I was at a near jog, moving as though my destination was just around the corner. Isabelle was right behind me and being pushed from behind by a group of young Italians. They wanted to get there just as bad as we did and after three days on the trail and three nights sleeping in only moderate comfort some people likely wanted it to be over. A small part of me wanted it to be over too. Being elbowed in the head as people raced past was not my idea of fun.

Before I knew it the Sun Gate was upon me. Directly ahead was Machu Picchu, only it was so cloudy there was nothing to see. Tom, one of the Brits, and the fastest of our group, had been sitting there for almost a half hour, hoping and praying that the clouds would lift. Over the next few minutes most of our group showed up, all with that slightly disappointed look on their faces when they saw that that there was nothing to see.

The clouds were like a thick porridge and showed no signs of lifting. We decided to continue on to the main entry point into the site and hope against hope that it cleared up by the time we got there. As it happened the cloud gods were not on our side that morning. We sat for almost an hour gazing out at what would be the classic image of Machu Picchu and all we could do was wait. For brief moments the clouds were whisked away by the wind allowing us a brief glance at the incredible ruins below, but before long the clouds returned. Eventually we all agreed to descend to the site and join Javier for the tour.

After walking the sacred grounds of what was once the capital of the Inca Empire, Isabelle and I were asked if we wanted to do the climb up Wayna Picchu, the mountain sitting at 2,720 meters, about 360 metres above the ancient city. Only 300 people per day were allowed to climb the mountain so we decided to go ahead and do it, since we were unlikely to ever be back there again. We were number 289 and 290 so it was a good thing we did.

Climbing was straight up all the way. I thought the ascent to Dead Woman's Pass was straight up but this was straight up. The slick stone steps gave my groin quite a workout as I had to carefully balance myself with each and every movement. Isabelle shrieked on several occasions as she gingerly stepped up each wet stone to the next. The trail was not really a trail but more a series of worn stones ascending the side of the mountain, stuck into the side of it as if placed by the hand of a giant model maker. Traffic going up and coming down used the same trail, making the balancing act that much more difficult.

Reaching the top was a true relief, putting the fear of crashing and falling behind me. Isabelle, too, was relieved. "Wow, this is awesome!" she said as she gazed out over Machu Picchu and the valley below, despite the intermittent cloud soup passing by. Every once in a while it would clear enough to snap a photo and in those moments I felt like I was looking down on a jewel from high above. If ever there were a bird's eye view this was it. Breathing deep into my lungs I felt like I could jump off, fly above the ruins and float down slowly to the ground. I could have stayed up there longer but alas we had to get back down for the bus to Aguas Calientes, and the end of our trek.

Aguas Calientes is known for its hot springs so we decided we would go soak for a bit before catching the train back to Cuzco. Along with Jason and Kelly we met up with Mary and Sam in the hot pool. Coming from

Alberta, where hot springs are hot and the water is clear (and smells of sulphur), I was a bit distracted by the lukewarm, brown, and decidedly non-sulphur-smelling water. I was a bit reticent to actually get into the pool but there were many others already in it so I figured, why not? It wasn't that bad, really, but I didn't want to hang out there too long. After a brief chat with everyone we took our leave and headed out to the train for a return trip to Cuzco. We'd be heading to Bolivia the next day and I, for one, was ready to get going.

Bolivia—The Great Escape

I knew about the scams in Bolivia, especially the ones on buses. I had read in a few places online and in guidebooks that often someone who appeared to work for the bus company would ask everyone for a 'tax' to be collected on behalf of the city, or state, or some other jurisdiction. It was never a very large tax, but it was always bogus. Wouldn't you know it, there we were not thirty seconds past the Peru-Bolivia border and somebody was asking for three bolivianos (less than 50 cents) for some kind of tax. The fact that the scam was known did not stop it from happening, obviously.

I asked Isabelle, "Should we pay it? We know it's not legitimate."

Her response put things in perspective for me: "It's fifty cents. Do we really want to raise a stink over fifty cents?"

She was, of course, right. I paid the tax.

A fellow passenger in the rear of the bus had other ideas. He demanded to know what the tax was for and he demanded a receipt. (I gathered this from someone in the row behind us who translated for me.) After some double-talk the tax collector gave the guy a useless receipt and we were on our way. Was all of Bolivia going to be like this?

Puno

Puno, unlike the impression left by the colourful and descriptive brochures, is a dirty, busy, chaotic place, and our hotel was situated right in the middle of it. I knew we were in for a short and restless sleep when we arrived at the hotel and saw that there was some kind of parade passing by right outside. Music was blaring (the decibel level would have put a Metallica concert to

shame) and nearly everyone was dancing, including what appeared to be police and army personnel.

After things had quieted down enough for us to actually go outside we strolled down the main street and found a quaint little place called Inca Bar and settled in for dinner. We sat looking out the front window onto the street as people in the parade passed by. Several vendors outside used the window as an opportunity to display their goods to us. I couldn't help but wonder, does anyone ever actually buy those little finger puppets? Sitting right behind us inside the restaurant was a giggling baby and her teenaged mother. The giggles sounded like a baby lamb and caught the attention of anyone within earshot.

There's something about babies that just makes me feel good, and helps me to forget about whatever else is on my mind. I felt the tension in my head and shoulders loosen just a bit as I listened to her beautiful giggles resonate in the little restaurant. All throughout dinner I found myself giggling right after she did. Part of me wondered if my reaction was based on my need for something to snap me out of the somewhat negative mood I was in due to the less-than-ideal town and hotel, or my ongoing thoughts about becoming a dad myself. Isabelle and I made the conscious decision to do this trip *before* kids, despite us both wanting to have children. That little girl must have touched a nerve in me. Perhaps it did in Isabelle too.

We stayed only one night in the decidedly musty and dirty hotel. After breakfast we were on a bus to Copacabana, the other supposedly quaint town on Lake Titicaca. Things seemed to be cleaner and more relaxed in Copa and the tensions I had picked up in Cuzco and Puno started to melt away. I felt a bit like I was on holiday, not on the trip. I discovered there, at an early stage in our adventure, that there was a distinct 'holiday' feeling and a 'travel' feeling that are not even close to being the same. This had a holiday feel to it—a slower pace, few hassling hawkers, and a placid lake set against a cloudless blue sky and galloping mountains. The crowds were gone, thus giving me my treasured personal space (I did not know until that point in time how truly treasured it actually was) and my blood pressure had dropped like a stone. Looking out over the lake from the restaurant at Hostal La Cúpula I found it hard to believe that I was in one of the world's ten poorest and most destitute countries.

Boat tickets to Isla Del Sol were only a couple of dollars each so we snapped them up quickly. We had heard that the island was an absolute

gem, sitting in the middle of the world's highest navigable lake. The altitude was immense (3,800 metres) but thankfully I was still taking my altitude sickness pills and felt no ill effects.

I had been on many boats and ferries in my life but never had I seen anything quite as pathetic as the boats they expected people to get into to take the nearly three hour ride across the lake to Isla del Sol. Built in the 1960s (at the latest) the rust-bucket we got into had a flimsy ladder leading up to the second deck, which felt more like the roof of a truck, the perimeter encased by another flimsy railing. Had a stiff breeze come up that railing would have gone straight into the lake, and all the passengers along with it. Despite this, everyone raced for the upper deck. Down below the lower deck was much the same, minus the view. Powering the bucket of bolts were two 20cc Evinrude outboard motors. Once on our way I figured out quickly why it took almost three hours to reach the island: my push lawnmower back home generated more power than both of those motors, combined. I felt like I was trawling for fish, not actually trying to get somewhere.

Isla del Sol

Isla del Sol offers amazing views of the lake and of Copa and surrounding area. What it does not offer is a nice place to stay, or eat. Guidebooks suggest a number of decent lodging options and backpacker bars and the like but, ultimately, they lie. The most noteworthy thing about the whole island, other than the rather pleasant trek along the path located along the spine of the island, is that there is one tiny little impossible to find house that has, upstairs, the island's only Internet connection. In contrast to the absolute squalor right outside that small room had brand new equipment for surfing the Internet and calling home to disbelieving friends and family.

Returning back to our luxurious \$24 per night hotel room (which was about as much as you can pay for a night on the island) I found Isabelle wearing *all* of her clothes. Well, not exactly all of her clothes, but pretty close: rain pants, rain jacket, toque, mittens, scarf, and nearly everything else. I dared to ask why she would do such a thing, given that it wasn't cold enough to warrant such a display.

“This place is disgusting. The sheets are stained, there are bugs everywhere, the bathroom is gross, and I don’t want any part of my body to touch the bed.”

“Oh,” was all I could offer in reply.

This was what was quickly becoming known as what I liked to call *The Uncomfortable Factor* and it would rear its ugly head many times before our epic journey would come to an end. I couldn’t deny the place was sub-par, but I thought wearing all of ones clothes was an interesting way to express it.

Breakfast offered a respite from the uncomfortable factor and somewhat negative feelings that pervaded my consciousness. On the grounds of the hotel were a couple of tables constructed of smooth, weathered logs, simple and surprisingly comfortable. We shared a basic meal of eggs and toast with a young guy from Scotland, who was living in New York City. He was traveling throughout South America on his own, taking a break from the crazy life of high finance in the Big Apple.

A very young girl—a toddler—approached our table as we ate. My first thought was that she was going to try to sell us some of those finger puppets I had since developed a disdain for. Thankfully, she didn’t. In fact, she was so young that she didn’t speak Spanish yet, let alone English.

She couldn’t have been much more than two years old, wearing a frilly pink dress, and had a deep, dark complexion. Her large brown eyes told me she was older and wiser than her young age would suggest. She reached for Isabelle’s hand to hold it in her own. Isabelle let out a muffled laugh, not sure what to think, or do. The little girl and Isabelle became fast friends, not speaking, but simply being close to each other and holding hands. Again I had that relaxing and happy feeling I did when the baby girl was giggling in the restaurant in Puno; the feeling of wanting to be a father and wanting to have a close connection with a young child, one I could protect, provide for, and watch grow up.

Isabelle and this beautiful little girl held hands, cuddled, and playfully enjoyed each other’s presence. They were both smiling from ear to ear and laughing deeply. I watched, rather surprised to be so engaged in something so simple. Our Scottish friend was taken by the whole scene also. This girl, living in such difficult conditions, who knew nothing different, had captivated the three of us by simply being herself—a young and pure child learning about the world from moment to moment. It struck me that I, too, was learning about the world this way also. This sweet little girl had

come as some sort of gift, providing a lesson on how to truly experience the moments, and how to be excited and happy about each one of them.

La Paz

La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, is like most big, dirty cities I have seen except it is set in a deep valley and is actually quite picturesque with the mountains rising up all around it. All the houses look the same, with red brick walls and tin roofs. Descending into the city by bus gave me the sensation of going deeper and deeper into a volcano. The rim of the volcano was lined with houses and numerous telecommunications towers while the inside was a continuous red and adobe onslaught on the eyes. Thanks to the high altitude and deep blue sky I hardly noticed the choking vehicle exhaust that seemed to plague most major cities these days. Lumbering buses spewed thick black toxins as they struggled mightily up and down the many steep streets of the city. Everywhere I looked I saw a mix of country people and city dwellers hustling through the crowded streets, randomly intertwined with the heavy and relentless traffic. I imagined this was what an ant hill looked like up close.

Our first pleasant surprise of the trip came when we, for whatever reason, were given a Junior Suite rather than a regular room at the Columbus Hotel in La Paz. It was the nicest room we'd had since the trip started so we ordered room service and watched a movie on TV. We even had *hot* showers (something the hotel proudly displayed on the sign outside; that's right folks, we have hot *and* cold water), also the first in two weeks. It was the happiest I had seen Isabelle since sometime in December.

"I haven't seen you smile for a while," I said.

"I know, it's been tough," she replied.

"Having spent two weeks being sweaty, dirty, and living in less than ideal conditions, has taken its toll. We have to readjust our expectations, Sweetie. We're going to be away for a long time and we need to expect that some of those nights will be spent in nice places and some will be in shitholes."

"I know," she said, and after a long pause offered, "but I don't have to like it."

"You don't have to like it, but it's important to accept it. We'll do the best we can, okay?"

"Okay."

We drifted off to sleep and slept like rocks until late the next morning.

La Paz—Uyuni—Villazón

I had wanted to see Salar de Uyuni (salt flats) from the moment I first saw pictures of it many years before. It looked otherworldly—harsh yet beautiful at the same time. I simply had to see it in person. From La Paz it was possible to make plans to go there but, according to the travel agent we spoke to, the flats had experienced lots of rain and it was unclear if there would be any tours in the next few weeks. We tentatively booked with the agent and then got our money back the next day as we were informed there was too much rain. Now what? If we can't go to Uyuni where should we go?

La Paz, despite being the capital city of a nation and home to several million people, would never be mistaken for an ultra-modern metropolis and transportation hub. It is not easy to get out of La Paz if you want to go anywhere meaningful, on your own timeline, by any mode of transportation. We wanted to go to Argentina next but I personally did not want to sell my left testicle in order to pay for it. We knew we were stuck but we had no other choice than to break the bank so we decided to take the nine-hour night bus to Uyuni and take our chances from there.

I knew we were in for a rough ride after the first few minutes outside of La Paz. The Bolivian road system, as I had noted on a map I had found, consisted of only a couple of highways and that was about it. Beyond that it was really quite debatable as to what qualified as a road. The way to Uyuni was really delineated by a washboard dirt track of questionable repair. In the early going I expected the bus to rattle for a while as we crossed tougher track but, to my horror and dismay, it lasted the entire time, except for when we crossed raging rivers or were stopped completely. I popped a few pills to settle my stomach and mercifully stole a couple of hours of sleep while my brain rattled inside my skull, likely causing irreparable damage.

At about six in the morning we came to yet another halt and sat for several minutes. A few people got up to see what was going on. I decided to join them and peeked outside. To my horror I found that we were one of a convoy of a dozen buses sitting in the middle of a sloppy, rain-soaked desert. For as far as the eye could see was what should have been a

scrub-brush desert with mountains in the distance. It wasn't until I got out and saw what was in front of the convoy that I realized the problem—a huge hill about a hundred metres high and about five hundred metres in front of us had virtually enveloped an entire bus in mud. The bus had reached about half way up the hill and was sunk about a foot deep into the muck. Directly in front of us were about a dozen buses, a four-by-four truck, and a half-ton truck, all waiting to get up the hill. *Shit, we're going to be here awhile.* We all poured out of the bus to stretch our legs and ponder our current predicament. Slowly, everyone from our bus and the others started to walk down the track and up the hill. It would be easier for the busses to make it up the hill without us in them, apparently.

At the crest of the hill sat the first bus. Several locals, and even a few tourists, grabbed stones and pieces of brush and threw them in the path of the bus, attempting to create some traction for the tires. The driver gunned the engine; the tires spit out mud and branches ten feet into the air and slid sideways at the same time. The engine smoked and the tires spun uselessly on what was then a slick surface. The group watching the action, numbering about two hundred by that point, let out a collective groan similar to the one you might hear when a hockey player misses an open net on a breakaway or when a football player fumbles the ball in the end zone. *Shit, we're going to be here even longer.*

Suddenly a backhoe, like a golden horse on the horizon, appeared from the other side of the hill. I said out loud to nobody in particular, "Where the hell did that come from?" It was big enough to pull the bus forward if they could figure out how to set it up. That process took another twenty minutes or so but it worked. With a chain tied to the bucket the backhoe managed to pull the bus through another layer of stones and branches and just to the other side of the hill's crest. The bus then drove forward another fifty meters or so.

"That bus needs to drive further ahead otherwise the next one behind it, or the one after, won't have room to get past this muddy spot and we'll be doing this all over again," I said to Isabelle. Seconds later the signal was given to the next bus in the line down the hill to start its approach. Two minutes later it came ripping past us and lined up behind the other bus. The next one fulfilled my prediction and got stuck behind the other two, right in the middle of the soupy muck.

Seventeen—instead of the scheduled nine-hours after leaving La Paz we rolled into Uyuni.

“Is this a ghost town?” I asked Isabelle.

“Oh my god, this is awful,” was all she could muster.

“I hope it gets better than what we’re looking at right now.”

The streets were devoid of anything except wild dogs. It felt like an Old West town: wide boulevards, peeling paint on the storefronts, and wind blowing paper and other trash across the road. Garbage had accumulated in corners and a few trucks from the 1950s leaked oil on what wasn’t already covered by shit and trash. I was surprised to see such squalor given that this was the place tourists from all over the world would stay in order to see the famous salt flats.

Our plan was to catch a train out of town as soon as possible to the southern town of Villazón, which sits on the border with Argentina. We knew there were buses headed there, as well as to Tupiza and Potosi, which would get us closer to Argentina. After trying to get oriented for a few minutes we decided to head to the train station and see what the deal was. I walked in to talk to the man behind the desk and I already started to feel a little uncomfortable. I had the feeling things were not going to work out and the look on his face said: Too bad, tourist!! Sure enough he barked at me that there was no train. He spoke no English so my further questions were received by a blank stare. “No trains,” he repeated. I turned to Isabelle, sitting in a row of chairs against the wall, and shrugged my shoulders. I attempted to convey to the man that I was interested in finding out when the next one would be. “Cuatro días,” he replied. Four days.

I went and sat next to Isabelle and tried to tell her the bad news as nicely as I could. At that moment a young man I had seen on the bus from La Paz walked past. I remembered him from the bus station in La Paz because I had overheard him speaking English to someone. After talking to the angry train guy he turned and started walking back to the door.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?” I asked as he passed.

“Yes, I do.”

“What did the man tell you about the next train?”

“He said that there is no train to Villazón until Friday.”

“That’s what he told me. How are we supposed to get out of here?”

“I’m not sure but I have been talking to a few Argentinians who are trying to rent a Jeep to drive them to Tupiza. Would you be interested in that?”

I turned to Isabelle, she nodded yes, and I said “Yes.”

We started walking back to town and kept chatting. Before I knew it Juan had told us about a cheap hostel nearby and the fact that he was going on a tour of the salt flats tomorrow. He asked, “Would you like to join me on the tour?” *Who is this guy?*

Juan was a recent university graduate taking some time away from his parents and was traveling on perhaps the smallest budget known to man. He was 23, tall, dark, and handsome, with an infectious smile and positive disposition. He had decided that he wanted to travel South America by bus or train only, and he would spend at least half of his nights sleeping in those buses or trains. That meant he could spend little money on other things, like tours, hostels and food.

We talked to Juan about Colombia, as Isabelle and I had spent a week in Bogotá two years prior. We reminisced about the dichotomy that is Bogotá, ranging from the truly wealthy neighbourhoods to some of the most violent and scary places on earth. He said, “I love Colombia, you know, but I also love to see other places and I want to expand my views, and also work on my English!” His English was very good, and his Spanish, though slightly different than the folks in Bolivia spoke, was what helped get us through the next several days.

We ultimately ended up at the hostel Juan had mentioned. He had the \$3 U.S. per night room, leaving the best available room—consisting of a bed and night table—at about \$6, which I said I would like to see. It was a dump of course. When she saw it Isabelle started retreating into her uncomfortable zone. It was all they had so we would just have to deal with it. I went down to the front desk to pay. The manager then told me that a room had become available that had its own bathroom; would I be interested? In less than a heartbeat I said yes. One hundred Bolivianos (around \$12); no problem! Isabelle still slept with all her clothes on but at least she had a private shower in the morning.

The trip to the salt flats took two non-requested stops at what was to become what I called “forced selling environments”—the trinket shops you get paraded through simply because you are a tourist. If you are interested in blobs of salt, or blobs of salt that have been crafted into something else, like a salt shaker, then this was the place to get them. I put on a happy face and tried to look interested.

Perched at an elevation of nearly 3,700 metres (12,000 feet), Salar de Uyuni is the world’s largest salt plain. Over ten metres thick in places, it covers an area of 10,500 square kilometers (twice the size of Prince Edward

Island). As we drove I struggled to get a fix on the horizon. The Jeep's tires parted the three inches of rain water with ease and made a soft rumbling sound, like that of a tiny waterfall, as we sped toward the mountains in the distance. Try as I might, I could not find the horizon until my eyes finally drifted toward a tiny little dark speck in the distance. As we approached I spotted more specks, and then more. The specks were actually people, and gave me a reference point from which to find where the sky met the ground, and vice versa. The reflection of the clouds on the water made it seem like we were actually floating. "This is absolutely amazing," was all I could muster as I picked my jaw up out of my lap. Juan, normally rather chatty, said nothing and simply stared out the window. Isabelle, too, was speechless.

After a short while we arrived at the salt hotel, a famously photographed resting spot in the middle of the plain. As I got out of the Jeep I thought I would step into ice cold water but I was surprised to feel the warm water in between my toes. The sun, fighting through the heavy cloud, had warmed the ground just enough to make the water quite pleasant. I spent the next two hours frolicking like a little kid on the salt plain. We took trick-of-the-eye pictures of each other, using the hard-to-find horizon and the reflecting water on the ground as our canvas. I posed like a tree, a yoga master, and a stick figure—all the while contemplating where I was, and how I came to be there.

I closed my eyes and let the sun warm my face as I tried to piece together the past few days, weeks, and months. It happened quickly. Images flashed through my mind's eye of everything from the times Isabelle and I spent in coffee shops around Toronto talking about the trip to the frantic days before leaving our house, to Machu Picchu, to Lima, Isla del Sol, and La Paz. I felt a sense of frustration that I had not enjoyed these times as much as I perhaps should have. It all happened so quickly. *Did I really live these moments or did they simply happen to me?* I was adrift in my thoughts when Juan's excited voice pierced my inner silence.

"Jason, take my picture while I stand on my hands."

He had already begun to get in position as he said it so I quickly lifted the camera to my eye and snapped a few pictures. The smile on his face and exuberant energy told me that he was truly enjoying himself, immersed in the moment. Within minutes of playing around and posing I was covered in salt. Every inch of exposed skin felt gritty and dry, like I

was being exfoliated at a giant spa. A thought suddenly hit me: I wonder if I appeared as a speck to someone?

After we arrived back in Uyuni we discovered that the Jeep the Argentines had hired was not going to Tupiza due to the rain. Another bridge was washed out so nobody was going anywhere. I asked Juan what he wanted to do.

“I want to get to Villazón, somehow,” he said.

“Us too,” I replied.

He went to talk to one of the tour operators in their cramped little offices and found out that there was a bus to Potosi arriving soon and it would be leaving about ten minutes later. After a quick chat we decided we wanted to get on it. Even though it was heading way east of where we wanted to go it was at least heading south, closer to the border with Argentina. In a flurry of discussions we decided we were getting on the bus when it arrived, which was only a minute or two later. Juan simply told us to get on, so we did. We quickly covered our backpacks with rainproof covers and handed them to a kid no more than fourteen years old who strapped them on the roof with the other passengers' bags. We scrambled into two seats in a bus that was clearly not meant for tourists. Locals were sitting in the aisle, or on top of each other, so the fact that we had two seats together was amazing. Juan then arrived and I said there was another seat behind us but he said he was going to sit up front with the driver.

The quality of the road to Potosi was, incredibly, much better than the one from La Paz to Uyuni. We did have to get out once however in order for the bus to pass a stalled truck in the middle of the night. The theory was that if the pass was unsuccessful then it was only our bags that got swept away in the river, not us. Regardless, we suffered the eight hours or so and arrived in Potosi at 3:00 AM.

We had no idea where to go, and were half asleep, but Juan took control, got us a taxi to the bus station (there was no real bus station that night, it was just where the next bus to Villazón was leaving from and I had no idea how we would have found it otherwise) and somehow talked us onto the bus. Apparently there were exactly three seats left. We threw our bags into the cargo hold and headed into the bus—we would pay later. It left two minutes later. Juan had saved our collective bacon once again.

The bus was more like the kind we were used to as tourists. It had two levels and was considerably newer and cleaner than the bus that got

us to that point. At three in the morning no bus smells good and no bus is free of humidity, and this one was not breaking either of those rules. It was another uncomfortable trip but by that time Isabelle had pretty much shut down so she didn't need to wear all of her clothes in order to avoid the disgusting seats. We stepped over people sleeping in the aisles and found three seats together in the very last row. I was extremely tired so I quickly settled in and fell asleep almost immediately. My last thought before fading into sleep: next stop Villazón, and hopefully getting out of Bolivia.

The smell of urine jolted me out of my slumber. *Where was it coming from? Was it really urine? What the hell was going on?* My mind raced and simply did not want to settle on the reality of the situation. In the row in front of me, a young boy of perhaps three or four years of age was pissing into a small plastic bag. I was dazed and still not altogether awake when something even more horrendous happened: when the young boy was finished his brother, a boy of perhaps six years, began to piss into the same plastic bag. My seat was positioned precisely where it needed to be in order for me to witness the atrocity in between the seats of the row ahead. I continued to struggle with comprehending what was going on. *Why is this woman making her sons pee into a bag* (I wasn't awake enough to remember that there was no toilet on the bus) *and, significantly more important, what is she going to do with this bag once the second boy had done his business?* A sense of panic began to creep into my consciousness as the woman leaned across the second seat, on which slept her very young daughter, and pushed open the window ever so slightly. *No, she's not going to do it. She can't do it!*

The window was barely cracked open, only a few inches. I thought: she can't fit that bag through there. She wouldn't do it, would she? Then, she did it! My still slumbering brain was sharp enough only to tell my head to turn away as the urine, propelled by the oncoming wind of the open window, splashed on my face, lips, and jacket. I turned to Juan and Isabelle and found that they had suffered the same fate.

As I hastily wiped the urine off my face the young boy sitting to my right in the back row threw up onto his mom before she could get a plastic bag into position. Urine and vomit: a terrible combination. All I could think was how strong and committed these Bolivian women were. Somehow I was able to suppress the gag reflex when I got a whiff of the puke and tried to close my eyes again and forget about it. I eventually

nodded off into another brief rest and before I knew it we had *finally* arrived in Villazón, sixteen hours after leaving Uyuni.

I had heard that the best way to cross into La Quiaca, Argentina from Villazón was to walk across the border. It was supposed to be faster and easier than going across by bus. We therefore gathered up our backpacks and started what we thought was a short walk to the border. It was before noon yet it was starting to get quite warm and I was getting sweaty. No problem, only a few hundred metres to go, I kept thinking. Later I could see ahead that a line had formed to enter Argentina at the border crossing. It will go quickly, I said to myself.

"Where do we go?" I asked Juan.

"I'll go ask which line," he replied.

Nobody seemed to know what was going on as there were two real lines and a number of other people simply milling around.

"This one," Juan came back and said, pointing to the shorter of the two. We shuffled into position and stood, waiting expectantly.

As we stood waiting for the line to move I couldn't help but notice the wild dogs hanging around looking for scraps. One had found a discarded, and full, diaper and was making quite a mess of itself. Why was there a full diaper on the ground? What planet was I on? Why did I get a bag of piss sprayed on me? How long will it be until I get a good night's sleep?! Pigeons were picking at garbage piles only feet from the lineup of hopeful travelers. It wasn't long before I noticed something that unsettled me deeply. Something I hoped was not true. Sadly, it was true: the line wasn't moving. I looked ahead, hoping to see clues as to why this might be the case. I then went ahead to the service window but found no answers. Then I heard, thanks to Juan, that the border staff had decided to go on lunch break, so they shut everything down. Word had it that they would return in two hours.

"Two fucking hours!! Are you kidding me?" I burst out. "We come all this way and now we have to wait in the hot sun with our heavy backpacks while the entire staff has lunch for two hours? Holy shit."

Isabelle did her best to calm me down but I knew she was upset too.

"What kind of country is this?" was my final outburst before I accepted defeat and quietly settled back into line.

Somehow we managed to keep it together for another two hours until the border opened again. Juan and his ridiculously upbeat attitude helped keep me from ripping someone's face off. I had built up some

anger over the previous two sleepless nights and I was desperate to get out of Bolivia.

Finally the line moved and we gave our passports to the lifeless dolts behind the glass and waited for the inevitable stupid questions. Thankfully, the questions didn't come. Just the confused looks as they tried to decipher our apparently complex passports. Mister immigration man, with the personality of a couch, finally handed back our passports and waived us through. I kept asking myself if this was really the fastest way through the border but then I realized it didn't matter anymore because we were already in the line to have our bags searched. When it was all over I was so happy to be in Argentina I think I actually shed a tear of joy.

As I took in the scene on the other side it appeared we had gone from dump to dump; only this dump had paved roads. More wild dogs, more empty streets, more garbage on the side of the road, more wishing we were in Salta, our next destination. The bus to Salta wouldn't depart until 11:15 PM so we had another six hours to kill. Juan, Isabelle, and I found what appeared to be the only open restaurant in the entire town. To my surprise the TV in the restaurant was tuned to the NFL's AFC Championship Game between the New England Patriots and my San Diego Chargers. My brother Colin and I are perhaps the only San Diego Chargers fans outside of San Diego and we rarely got a chance to see them on TV so this was a real treat, especially considering where I was. They lost the game but at least it took my mind off the past couple of days and the next long bus ride.

"As much as I am not looking forward to this bus ride I am excited about getting to Salta and relaxing in a comfortable hotel for a few days," I said to Isabelle as we boarded yet another bus.

"I can't wait to get there, Sweetie," she replied.

"I'm going to crash and sleep for a whole day."

"Me, too. Bolivia has been really tough. It will be nice to stay in one place."

"Now we just have to get through this bus ride. It can't be as bad as the last few, can it?"

"Nothing can be that bad. I think we've hit our limit."

I seemed to doze in and out of sleep for what seemed like a few hours, bumping along the road in the upper section of a double decker bus. It smelled of a men's locker room and the air was thick with sweat. I hope we get there soon, I said to myself for what seemed like the hundredth time

in the last few days. Suddenly the bus pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. Passengers started to stir and mumble.

"What's going on?" Isabelle inquired, in a throaty half-sleep.

"I don't know," I replied.

I looked across the aisle to Juan; he was fast asleep. The lights came on, just as they do when a plane arrives at the terminal. I glanced outside and saw that we were clearly not at a terminal or bus stop.

A man appeared at the top of the stairs to the upper deck cabin. He was most decidedly not the bus driver. The stiff light brown uniform and black belt holstering a hand gun were my first clues. My mind started to race. Was this a hijacking? Were they going to hold us hostage? Who the hell was this guy? Was this an army officer, or imposter? How much money did I have in my pockets? Was he going to pull his gun? How many men were outside? I glanced over to Juan. He was bright eyed and reaching into his backpack. Clearly he knew what was going on. I looked at him intently, hoping he would look my way. He glanced over and quietly said "You need to get your passport out, they are doing a check."

A second man then appeared in the cabin. He, too, was tall, dark, and had a dead straight look on his face. Both men went to each passenger, one by one, and asked for passports; barking at those that were still asleep or in a half-slumber. I handed the first officer passports for me and Isabelle. He took a cursory glance at them and flipped them back to me. He then went to Juan and asked for his passport. The officer looked at Juan and back at his passport perhaps four times, as if trying to distinguish if the man in front him was really the one in the passport photo. He barked something in rapid Spanish and Juan then stepped out of his seat to the aisle. He reached for his backpack and handed it to the officer. Juan seemed cool about the whole thing and simply stood back while the officer ripped into his backpack, in search of what I had no idea.

Then it hit me. Was he picking on Juan simply because he was from Colombia? *It was possible.* I glanced back at the officer as he pulled a small package from the backpack. I knew exactly what was in there, the salt trinkets that Juan bought on the salt flats. The officer handed the package to him, and motioned for him to open it. As he unwrapped the package I could see that the officer was completely transfixed on it. This guy thought it was cocaine; I could see the knowing look in his eyes. As Juan finished unwrapping the package the officer snatched the trinket, a small toy house, maybe three inches high and three inches wide, with

his left hand, and reached into his pocket with his right. He pulled out a switchblade knife and snapped it open. The blade was about five inches long and gleamed in the semi-light of the cabin. He brought the knife up to the toy house and scratched a swath across it like he was peeling an orange. The salt fell to the floor as Juan looked on. That was supposed to be a gift, I recalled. The officer brought the blade to his lips and lightly touched it on his tongue. The look of knowing he had previously left his face in a split second. He quickly handed the toy house back to Juan and moved on to the next passenger.

Within minutes the officers had made their way through the bus and made a hasty departure down the stairs. Everyone was still mumbling and shifting in their seats when the bus started again and began to rumble. My head was still spinning with questions when the bus turned back into the road and accelerated forward. The lights went out and the sound of voices subsided.

I leaned across the aisle to Juan and asked, "What was that all about?"

He finished putting the package into his backpack and said "I'm not sure, but it's not the first time that's happened to me. It's too bad he damaged my gift."

After another few hours of exhausting and restless sleep I felt the bus slow down and pull off the road again. *Are we going to stop every few hours?* I anxiously awaited the sight of another officer coming up the stairs, but nothing happened. The lights came on in the cabin and, as last time, passengers began to stir and slowly awaken. There was still no sight of anyone coming up the stairs. Juan looked out his window and informed us that passengers were gathering on the side of the road.

"I guess we're getting out," I said to Isabelle.

Slowly we all made our way down the stairs and out of the bus. "What's happening?" Isabelle asked.

"I wish I knew."

Juan disappeared around the back of the bus and came back in a flash. "We have to get our luggage and go to that building over there," he said, pointing to a run-down brick building perhaps twenty metres away.

"What do we have to do?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but we have to go there now," he replied.

This just keeps getting stranger and stranger. After we found our backpacks we threw them over our shoulders and joined the line in front

of a table that had been set up in front of the building. The light shining down on us was excruciatingly bright and burned my eyes in the otherwise pitch black night. I suddenly felt like I was about to be interrogated. Some passengers were peeling off the otherwise straight line to have a cigarette or chat, or in one young woman's case try to empty something from her backpack without anyone seeing. I was half asleep so I had no idea what was going on.

"They must be looking for drugs or weapons or something," I said to Isabelle and Juan.

"It's probably routine, just like last time," Juan offered.

"I hope we don't have to keep getting out of the bus every couple of hours," I said, truly hoping it would be the case.

"They don't even stop you this often in Colombia."

"Backpackers must be considered dangerous in Argentina," I said, still considering Juan's comment.

As the line moved forward I saw the same young woman who was trying to take something out of her backpack now stepping back in line, attempting to get to the very back. It occurred to me that she had something suspicious in there and wanted to see if she could avoid the search altogether by going to the back on the line.

Slowly the line moved forward. The officers randomly looked into backpacks, suitcases, and bags. *What the hell are they looking for?* There didn't appear to be any particular rhyme or reason to their search. Some passengers had their underwear and other personal items thrown about while others were not even searched at all. I started to wonder if these guys, whoever they were, were just bored and needed something to do in the middle of the night so they decided to pull over a bus full of sleepy backpackers just for fun.

At last, I was next. I tossed my backpack onto the table. The officer looked at it for no more than three seconds and waved me on with a dismissive flick of his wrist. That was it. I got off a bus in the middle of the night for that—a three second evaluation. If I wasn't so tired I'd have been deeply pissed off. I felt like the gods *did not* want me to get to Salta. It was hard enough trying to find a way out of Bolivia but now Argentina seemed to be a challenge too. I glanced at Isabelle, who had been given the same three-second treatment, and shrugged my shoulders. Juan was dismissed just as quickly. Before I knew it the officers began directing people back onto the bus. I dropped my head and began to shuffle my

tired feet in the direction of the bus. The young woman who looked so desperate to avoid the search happily threw her backpack together and nearly ran onto the bus. I wondered what she was trying to hide.

Argentina—Brushing off the dust

Salta

Salta, the capital of the Salta province, is located in northwestern Argentina. It sits at about 1,100 metres above sea level, nestled at the foothills of the Andes. Upon arrival at the bus terminal I poured my limp body out of the bus and onto the pavement. I knew I was only moments away from being able to comfortably rest my head and my body was shutting down before I wanted it to. Juan, somehow full of energy, ran off to figure out how to get us a taxi. He would get one for us before getting one for himself. Within minutes we stood on the sidewalk next to the open door of a taxi.

“Thank you so much for everything, my friend,” I said as I stuck my hand out to shake his.

“It’s been great meeting you both,” he replied with his signature toothy smile.

“I’m hoping we’ll run into you later in the trip. Let’s keep in touch by e-mail whenever possible.”

“Absolutely. After Argentina I’m going to Brazil.”

“We’re going there too.”

“Great.”

“Thanks for everything,” Isabelle added, leaning in for a hug. “You’ve made this so much easier for us. You’re like our special angel.”

“You are welcome. I’m happy to have been able to help you. You are very nice people. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

With that the taxi driver whisked us into the car and we were off. The sun was nearly up now, and the light of day was shining new hope and energy on us. I paid no attention to what was passing us by on the road as I stared out the window at the pale blue sky as it emerged from night. The clouds looked like fluffy soft pillows, waiting for my heavy head and exhausted body to fall into them. “We can rest soon; very soon,” I said to Isabelle. A smile slowly developed on her face. I could tell she was going to enjoy the upcoming sleep.

Just outside Salta, a city about a half million inhabitants, was our hotel, the House of Jasmines, sitting on 300 acres of lush green farmland. Until a month before the property was owned by American actor Robert Duval and his Argentinean wife. The hotel was a simple old farmhouse that had been lovingly converted to an Inn, with only seven guest rooms. Isabelle and I were both extremely tired from a week in Bolivia and were ready to relax in luxury for four days.

I knew we were a bit out of place the moment we walked in. We were received into what was the informal dining area and I felt like I had just walked into a décor magazine. The walls were whitewashed, the table a large slab of polished oak, every nook and cranny filled with the perfect knick knack to accent the space. Isabelle's face lit up like she had just found paradise after walking adrift in the desert for months. I became very aware of how dirty I was, having not had a shower in days. I tilted over and let my backpack slip off like a camel excitedly easing off a heavy load. It hit the floor with a thud; a small cloud of dust enveloped my feet. The porter seemed not to notice, or was kind enough to make nothing of it.

I glanced up to see a well-dressed couple enjoying their morning coffee in a sitting area. They were grey-haired, slim, attractive, and, I inferred, rather wealthy. The House of Jasmines was decidedly *not* a backpacker haunt. We had chosen it for exactly that reason. We were there to recover, relax, and live above our means for a few days. The grey-haired couple represented the type of patron I thought should be staying there. We, on the other hand, were not.

A man suddenly appeared through a doorway to my right, his eyes bright and his teeth shining white. He greeted us like long-lost friends. He, too, seemed to not notice how dirty and run-down we looked.

"Hola," he beamed.

"Hola," I replied, trying to match his high energy, but failing miserably.

"Let me take your bags. We'll put them just over there while we prepare your room. Please sit down for breakfast."

"I think I'm going to like this place," I said as I turned to Isabelle with a wide grin on my face. "This is a little different than the last few days, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm so happy to be here," she said, almost bursting with delight.

“After being on busses for the past few days I’m going to enjoy doing absolutely nothing for a while,” I said, as I eased down into the chair before devouring a breakfast of fruit, cereal, and heavenly-smelling bread.

Once I saw the bed in our room I knew I was going to sleep well. I quickly dumped my bags, not particularly caring where anything landed, and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. I never really thought I could enjoy a shower so much until that moment. *I deserve this. After the buses, and the piss, and the smells, and the delays, and the dirt, and the police, and everything I had to endure to get here, I really deserve this.*

More than two days passed before I began to feel human again. With a brief burst of energy I went to the lone computer in the place to see what was going on in the rest of the world. It was there I discovered that the Giants had stunned the Patriots in the Super Bowl, actor Heath Ledger had died of a potential drug overdose, and the stock market had crashed to levels not seen since the tech bubble burst. *Holy fuck, what was going on out there?*

It was strange to think of these events as *out there*. They didn’t seem to affect me; they were happening, literally, half a world away. I didn’t think, at least immediately, about the 20% drop in the value of my investment portfolio. I thought about how insulated I felt there in that little Inn in northern Argentina. I struggled to make a connection with the news. What did these things mean to me *at that moment*? Realistically they meant nothing. I should have felt them. I should have pondered them. They should have impacted me somehow. But they didn’t. What could I do about an upset in a football game, the death of an actor about fifty years too soon, or plummeting stock markets? Absolutely nothing. I moved on.

Buenos Aires

I had read that Buenos Aires was perhaps the most European city outside of Europe. It was supposed to have a cosmopolitan flair and feel more like Spain than South America. It didn’t take long after our arrival for me to agree with these assessments.

After we got into a taxi upon arrival at Jorge Newbery Airport, neither Isabelle nor I could figure out if the driver was mad at us or not. When I told him where we were going he began to rant, in Spanish, and make all sorts of sudden and sharp movements with his hands, often burying his

forehead in his hands and shaking his head like something horrible had just happened. He wore an almost painful look of disdain on his face for several minutes before it finally started to ease.

“What did we do to piss him off? Is it because the fare won’t be big enough?” I whispered to Isabelle. I needn’t have whispered as he likely didn’t understand English but I felt compelled to whisper anyway.

“I have no idea. It’s a bit weird.”

“I just hope he takes us to where we need to go.”

In what was perhaps too short of a drive we arrived at our destination, a studio apartment we had found on craigslist.com. We had seen pictures of the place online but weren’t really sure what to expect. Based on the e-mails I had traded with the apartment’s owner, Marcela, I had an image in my mind of what she would be like. I had envisioned a tall, fair-skinned woman in her late twenties and obviously educated, as her written English was nearly perfect. What I ultimately found was perhaps the antithesis of what I had imagined. Marcela turned out to be stout, in her mid-fifties, and obviously had spent too much time in the sun in her youth as her leathery skin seemed to follow just a fraction of a second after her frame when she moved.

Marcela had obviously had a bad experience with previous renters because she pulled out a multi-page contract, all in Spanish, that we had to sign stating that we wouldn’t steal any of the old, broken furniture or bedding or 35-year old TV set. The contract had a supplementary document that listed absolutely everything in the apartment, right down to the utensils and lamp shade. It was a tiny studio apartment and nothing in the place had been purchased after the 1980s but we had to sign that iron-clad contract saying we wouldn’t take any of her stuff. I stood there sweating my ass off and ready to pass out from exhaustion while she kept dragging on the discussion like some sort of lawyer. We paid \$240 U.S. for a week and she thought we were going to steal something? It was not the Ritz.

Nonetheless, the apartment was in the Palermo neighbourhood, one of the hippest in the city, with plenty of cafes, restaurants, and shops. Despite the excellent location, Isabelle’s *uncomfortable factor* kicked in again as she surveyed the apartment, specifically the bed: thread-bare sheets, smelly comforter, and perhaps the smallest and flattest pillows known to man. It was not Bolivia, but it was dangerously close. The apartment was so small that the bed *was* the living room and the kitchen was literally *in* the closet.

Despite my better judgment to just let her take it all in and process it for a while, I muttered “We’re going to be here for at least five nights so we had better get used to the place.”

Immediately the next morning we went shopping for something, anything, that would spruce the place up a bit. I was completely lost on how to do that but ultimately Isabelle decided on candles and table placemats, both light blue in colour, and some cleaning supplies to give her a sense that the place was up to her standards of cleanliness. We also scored some peanut butter, a very elusive product in South America for some reason, and a comfort food to us both.

“This street feels like Manhattan, doesn’t it?” I asked Isabelle as we strolled outside the apartment.

“It does,” she replied.

Buildings of various eras and designs towered above us on both sides. Corner stores offered fruits and vegetables in sidewalk stands and pedestrian traffic was heavy at every corner. On every block a beautiful, ornate, centuries-old building would spring up and catch my eye.

“It’s funny,” I said. “I can’t believe that not far from here in Bolivia the world is completely different. We’re still in South America but the places are so entirely different.”

Isabelle responded, “I’m so glad we’re here. This is the kind of place I was hoping it would be. It feels very comfortable, almost like home. I couldn’t handle another Bolivia right now.”

For the first time in a long time I felt like I was on a *holiday*. I was a legitimate tourist, exploring the city; eating, walking, and having fun on no set schedule. As we walked near Jardin Botanico I asked Isabelle if she was hungry. With a nod of her head I started looking around, on Avenida Santa Fe, for a restaurant.

“There’s one,” I said pointing down the street. “It’s called La Estancia. How about that one?”

“Let’s check the menu,” she replied.

“It looks good to me. Let’s do it.”

The place was a bit upscale compared to where we had typically been eating on the trip but I figured we deserved a good meal. Isabelle ordered wine, our meal was excellent, and we shared a truly enormous ice cream dessert. Our conversation was relaxed and enjoyable. Our waiter, despite speaking very few words of English, was an animated fellow. He used facial expressions and hand movements to get his messages across. His laugh was

infectious, as was his upbeat mood. I felt tickles of excitement again after a few weeks of often difficult traveling. Being on *holiday* was great.

A visit to Recoleta Cemetery, which had 4,800 plots, with massive mausoleums and monuments on most, was an eye-opener. Many historical figures and past Argentine presidents were laid to rest there. Some crypts were as big as a house and most were intricate in their design and construction. Eva Peron is buried there, in a rather normal looking structure off the main path. It was certainly the most popular stop for tourists as dozens of people crowded into an awkward space no bigger than a small closet trying to get good pictures of the façade. The cemetery had the feel of a small city, with the *houses* tightly packed together on narrow walking streets.

We made a stop at the Eva Peron museum also, which was an interesting historical jaunt to a very special time in the history of Argentina. We walked on Avenida Libertador, which reminded me of the broad streets near the waterfront in Chicago. There we visited the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. I snapped several pictures at Plaza del Uruguay and Plaza de Chile. Libertador's apartment buildings were like those of Manhattan's 5th Avenue. After all that walking and exploring and taking in the sights and sounds something about the place hit me; despite being home to over 12 million people the city didn't seem dirty, smoggy, or congested. The air actually was *buenos*.

As we lazed around the following morning I felt a bit like the starving artist whose lifestyle I had taken over, including living in a tiny little bachelor apartment in a hip part of town. Surely some people had jobs to go to, but not me. Later we used the subte (subway) for the first time, another surprisingly clean element to the city. Plaza de Mayo was impressive yet unfortunately marred by signs and graffiti with demonstration barricades. The Metropolitan Cathedral, which looked rather Roman from the outside, housed several chapels that could be churches on their own. The floor was made of individual coloured tiles that created intricate and mesmerizing designs. As with many things in B.A., the cost of entry was free.

After we entered the Centro Cultural Borges I was struck by large murals on the wall of tango dancers in colourful costumes. I had an idea.

"Would you like to go see a tango show?" I asked Isabelle.

"That sounds like a great idea. I would love to do that."

"Let's go see how much it is. We have to try to stick to our budget as much as we can."

“OK, let’s check it out.”

To my surprise the tickets were only 35 pesos and the show was two hours long. Until I saw it live I had no idea how talented tango dancers were. How they went flying around the stage at full speed without injuring each other was beyond me. The dance was not only very athletic but also very erotic. As I watched I started getting a little warm, possibly from the heat in the theater and possibly from the heat on stage. I felt myself getting completely lost in the performance. I forgot where I was, forgot what I had gone through to get there, and forgot that I was not the only one in the theater. It was as if the performance was just for me. For those two hours I was completely alone and I rather enjoyed it.

Our late-night snack, as was the custom in B.A., at the famous Il Gran Café, was excellent. The outdoor patio was a great place to simply watch people go by. I imagined their lives, imagined what they may have been thinking as they passed. I wondered if they may have been doing the same with me. Did they know I was on a trip around the world, living a childhood dream? Was there something about my appearance that showed this? Was I crazy to think that they may have been thinking about me at all?

We finished just after 11:00 PM and walked toward the subte station. As we approached I could see a large gate at the entrance to the station.

“I hope it’s not closed,” I said to Isabelle.

When we got closer it was apparent that it was, as the gate was padlocked. My first thought was that some kind of maintenance was going on or something.

“It’s awfully early to be shut down,” I offered. “Let’s check the travel guide and see if the operating hours are in there.”

Isabelle flipped open our handy Frommer’s guide and found the page that told us what we were hoping would not be the case. “It closes at 11,” she said.

“Shit, I guess we’re walking.”

I pulled out the big city map, found where we were and where we were going and said, “Let’s go.” We were a straight shot down one of the city’s best shopping thoroughfares, Santa Fe. After a stroll of about an hour, including stops to peer into windows of stores we knew we could not afford, we arrived safely home. It was all very clean, safe, and all very Manhattan.

Iguaçu Falls

One of our great debates while in B.A. was whether or not to spend several hundred dollars not in our budget to go to Iguaçu Falls. There was no way to get to Rio, our next stop, via Iguaçu, so we had to come back to B.A., thus doing a lot of flying and not gaining any real ground. After the Bolivian bus debacle I was more than happy to fly however. It was an expensive proposition but ultimately we felt we had to do it. I had similar feelings while in Bangkok in 2004 when we were questioning whether to take an expensive two-day trip to Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Ultimately we did go to Angkor and it was one of the highlights of my traveling life. With that in mind I told Isabelle we had to do it. She agreed, and we booked tickets to Iguaçu. I knew I would never regret it.

After we checked into the hotel in Puerto Iguaçu we walked across the street to the bus station to get tickets to the falls. As we walked to the ticket booth I swear I saw Juan, our friend from our Bolivian experience. "It looked just like him," I said to Isabelle.

"I think he was planning to come here, wasn't he?" she replied.

I ran ahead and turned a corner, expecting to see him, but he wasn't there. Maybe I was seeing things. "Maybe it wasn't him."

"Let's go get our tickets to make sure we get to the falls."

We grabbed our tickets and then waited for the next bus. Two minutes later, as I was buying a bottle of water, Juan appeared. "We can't get rid of you, it seems," I joked. "Hola, friends!" he exclaimed, flashing a bright smile. After a quick embrace we figured out that he was going to the Brazilian side of the falls that day. We were going to the Argentinean side so we made plans to meet later for dinner at our hotel.

To get to the falls required a bit of walking, via one of multiple trails, on which we came face to face with lizards, iguanas, and hundreds of species of butterflies. At several stops along the way the falls came into view, and they were awesome. The falls area was massive, and there were several walking paths that could be taken, many with lookouts providing different views of the many falls.

We stayed on the Argentina side and went on a very wet boat ride into the main mouth of the falls. I had never seen such a powerful natural force in my life from up so close. As the water came firing down its steep descent it seemed to separate for a brief moment, then recombine and smash into the river below, causing the river to push back with equal force

and splash water all over us. Each breath I took was a cool, humid one and it refreshed my entire body each time I drew one in.

The footbridge to the lookout point in the middle of the river took at least thirty minutes to traverse. Each time it twisted and turned I thought we'd reached the famous lookout point over the part of the falls called Devil's Throat and each time I was surprised that there was still more walking to do. The river was an amazing three miles wide but it felt even bigger when actually trying to walk across it. Finally at the lookout point there was a mad scramble amongst dozens of tourists to get a good spot to experience the falls and get that perfect picture. Before even reaching the end of the walkway I could hear and feel the water rushing past. Leaning over into the 'Throat' I felt like I could easily be sucked into the powerful flow and be swung around into the roiling, bubbling water as it slid down to the river below. As had become my habit on the trip I snapped off a number of digital photos and almost as quickly deleted most of them as they simply did not do justice to the actual scene.

Later on, amazingly, we also ran into Jason and Kelly, whom we met on our Inca Trail adventure, at a small snack shop along one of the walking trails. They decided to join us for dinner at the hotel also, bringing together our Inca Trail and Bolivian memories all at once. We all had relatively decadent meals, considering what we had been eating during our respective travels in South America. Over dinner we regaled each other with tales of our many adventures to that point in our trips. Jason and Kelly seemed to enjoy our urine in a bag story very much. At the end of the evening we parted ways with our friends but had decided to meet up with Jason and Kelly in Rio a few days later, as they were planning to go to a soccer game and I most definitely wanted to do that. Isabelle and I each embraced our traveling angel, Juan, and wished him well, not knowing if we would see him again, but hoping that we would.

Brazil—View from the top

Rio de Janeiro

We arrived in Rio at the end of January after going from Iguaçu back to Buenos Aires first. We spent an hour or so trying to get money from a number of bank machines at the airport. Several of the machines had

the VISA sign on them yet for some reason did not like *my* VISA card or Isabelle's for that matter. As I stood at one bank machine I glanced over to the money exchange booth as a young man counted out several thousand Euros and took back a massive stack of Reais, which he stuffed into not one, not two, but three packs wrapped around his waist. I wondered how much fun he was going to have at Carnaval.

It took another half-hour to figure out which bus to take to get to Leblon—up the beach from the more famous Ipanema—where we had rented a room in an apartment using craigslist.com. Once on the bus we spent an hour and a half bouncing along in the dark. Luckily I spotted the street name we were looking for on Rio's illuminated street signs and we hopped out, the last people on the bus. Thankfully the apartment was only five blocks away.

The next morning it was 30°C outside with only a few scattered clouds by 9:00 AM. We walked on the beach for an hour or so, working up a rather significant sweat. I took a picture of the "I+J Rio '08" heart shape I had scratched into the sand to capture our little moment. As I walked up the beach I started to sink into the moment a little bit and my body started to relax. The anxiety I had built up in trying to get the hell out of the airport and then find our apartment had stuck with me overnight and it had started to melt away. Although it was only mid-morning there were plenty of people already camped out on the beach and many children frolicking in the surprisingly cold surf.

To a certain extent the trip had felt like it was a race but it was moments like that, standing on a beautiful stretch of beach with the warm sun beating down on me, that things began to slow down. I felt a little bit closer to Isabelle as we were walking. Although we had been traveling almost a month, 24 hours per day, we hadn't been particularly close very often and I wanted that to change.

After walking and taking the metro and then a bus we finally made it to Sugar Loaf (Pão de Açúcar, a 1,300-foot high mountainous protrusion, serviced by a cable car since 1912)—somewhere I had wanted to go for as long as I could remember. From there I could see the entire city, including Corcovado, the other popular lookout peak, which is actually about 1,000 feet higher. The cable car immediately reminded me of Sulfur Mountain near Banff, where a cable car takes you up, up, and overlooks the entire Bow Valley. I snapped pictures all the way up, wanting to capture every second of it.

As I stood there looking out at the incredible views in front of me I asked myself how one city could be so blessed with such amazing topography. Mountains—lush with deep, dark greens—melding into a dark blue ocean, with other mountain-islands popping up as far as the eye can see. Beautiful golden sand beaches ringing the entire city, surrounding it and keeping it all together, contained. Inland lakes comingled with tall apartment buildings and other signs of big-city life. It was breathtaking. Time seemed to fly by as hours slipped past in what seemed like minutes.

After coming down from Sugar Loaf we milled around in the street near a bus stop for fifteen minutes asking each other rather redundant questions.

“What do you think we should do next?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, what do you feel like?” Isabelle replied.

“Well, I’m not sure. Maybe we should figure that out.”

“Okay, let’s talk about that. What do you want to do?”

It was all very non-committal, as though we were both desperate to not rush each other or hurt each other’s feelings by pushing our agenda on the other. Finally, inexplicably, we jumped onto a bus that had just arrived at the stop; #107 headed for downtown. Why did we get on that bus? We had no clue where we were going or where we would end up. After thirty minutes of teeth rattling and high speed corners Isabelle retreated into her shell and shut down, tired and without water. The bus driver drove triple the speed limit and regularly overshot his stops by about a block, forcing people waiting at those stops to hurriedly run to catch the bus before it sped off again. The bus’s constant gyration and jerking did not sit well with me, nor did the oppressive heat and humidity. Pissed off, I grabbed our Frommer’s travel book and tried to figure out where the hell we were by using the tiny little three-square-inch map. As the street signs ripped past I looked for something identifiable on the map that was close to a subway station. Finally, several minutes later, I found a subway stop. We had to get out now!

Once off the bus Isabelle, in her shut-down state, couldn’t decide whether or not to follow me to the subway station. She somehow decided that we should stay in Centro (downtown) since we’d likely never be there again. I reluctantly agreed, not because it wasn’t a good idea but because I was still pissed off for having to take charge when she shut down. I took the opportunity in Centro to buy a ridiculously expensive Rio city map because, as I told Isabelle in my most agitated tone, “I am tired of

constantly being lost and having no idea where I am.” It came out with such anger and fire that I scared her a little bit. I think I scared myself too.

Isabelle must have had an intuition about staying in Centro because we pulled out the Frommer’s and found a suggested restaurant nearby, the Confeitaria Colombo, an old teahouse built in 1894, and a Rio landmark. *That’s* why we got on the bus. *That’s* why we don’t always have things perfectly planned. *That’s* why we travel. It was moments like those that ultimately gave us stories to tell. The split-second decision to get on a bus, and off a bus, despite having no idea where we were going, was why I liked to travel—and experience my world—even if I might bitch about it at the time.

I had a coffee and a piece of cake and Isabelle had a tea. We chatted, relaxed, and both felt much better as the anxiety that had previously built up dissipated. I was happy for that because I was tired of being lost, tired of being pissed off, and tired of Isabelle being in her shell. I wanted to enjoy my journey and I wanted Isabelle to be present. Nothing could fix a negative attitude like coffee and cake.

That night, we joined a Carnaval block party not far from our apartment. These block parties were, at the root, a mix of loud music, shapely bodies, and copious amounts of alcohol. Ah, to be single and twenty-two again. Ah, to be a drinker (I gave it up years ago). Plenty of colourful costumes caught my eye as we tried to navigate the insanity. Everyone was having so much fun and had such positive energy it was impossible not to enjoy it.

“This is insane,” I yelled to Isabelle as I tried to stay within earshot while the wave of bodies shuffled me down the street.

Her wide, darting eyes told me she felt the same. “It’s so cool that this is happening so close to our place,” she responded excitedly.

That is what Rio is known for, those block parties during Carnaval. That is why people came from literally all over the world at that time of year. It occurred to me that that moment was truly special, and I was going to enjoy it.

Our second day in Rio started early as we joined our hostess Patricia and her boyfriend Pedro on a trip to a part of town called Santa Teresa. Another Carnaval parade was happening there too. We were also joined by their friend Marcos, who donned a very large yellow top hat for the festivities. Patricia wore butterfly wings on her back and a pink

Cinderella-like crown on her head. Isabelle and I stayed in tourist mode and carried our small backpacks. It was a habit I couldn't get out of after a while; there was always something to carry, usually at least one camera and always a bottle or two of water.

As our taxi drove further up into the hills of Santa Teresa it wound around corner after corner of walled streets. Finally, we reached our destination, and it was starting to look colourful and crazy on the streets again. As the taxi drove away I turned and saw Patricia and Pedro running frantically after it. Patricia, it turned out, had left her wings in the back seat and they both took off after the taxi as though they left a child in it by accident.

A mass of humanity had gathered and the temperature rose with each passing moment. I had not experienced anything like it since jumping around in a drunken mosh pit at a Tragically Hip concert about fifteen years before. The sweaty mass included thousands of beautiful people, scantily clad, and it actually had an objective, I think: move, ever so slowly, down the street. And that it did. I should have timed it but I'm sure it took at least an hour to cover two blocks. Isabelle and I, dressed like normal people, carrying backpacks, were swept along the sea of sweat in temperatures approaching 35°C, jostling and bumping with what must have been 10,000 people. The parade was considered fairly small by Carnival standards, according to Patricia.

After somehow extracting ourselves from the mayhem we dried off and were lucky to get a taxi. We immediately, without hesitation or any non-committal language around what we should do next, told the taxi driver to take us to Corcovado, the 2,330 foot mountain on the peak of which sits the Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) statue. This, too, was a place I had always wanted to see, not so much for the statue of Christ, but the incredible views of the city below.

Corcovado was crawling with tourists who were willing to get into all sorts of positions to get the perfect picture, including lying down flat on the cement or hanging half over a railing. From below the statue, an Art Deco masterpiece completed in 1931, with its arms positioned at perfect ninety-degree angles to its body, seemed almost to fly.

Standing at its base and looking up at the perfectly blue sky I almost fell backwards, losing my balance trying to take it all in. The statue seemed to defy gravity and simply float above the city below. Despite the slight haze in the sky the sensation of being up there was incredible. It seemed

to pump unlimited oxygen into my lungs. It was a life dream that had finally come true.

That night we had plans to go to a soccer game at Estádio do Maracanã with our friends from the Inca Trail, and fellow Canadians, Jason and Kelly. They had made previous arrangements with a tour company for tickets, including transportation to and from the game, and we decided to go with them. We met at a hotel close to the apartment we were staying at. We got there at about 4:15 PM as instructed by the tour company. We nervously waited until 5:30 PM (the game started at 6:00 PM) before somebody finally picked us up. Unfortunately it was not a regular shuttle bus driver who came to pick us up, it was a random employee of the so-called tour company.

She spoke no English and had no clue where she was going. She asked for directions no less than ten times as she spun us around city neighbourhoods at breakneck speeds. She refused to look at my awesome and expensive Rio city map and almost killed us a few times on its very confusing streets. On several occasions she slammed on the breaks so hard our bags went flying forward, one nearly smashing the front windshield. It was like suffering through air turbulence in a plane but there was nothing to keep us distracted from the constant bouncing and rolling. Ultimately we were twenty-five minutes late for the start of the game but I was happy to be there and even happier to be alive.

We met the tour guide near the stadium entrance. He was to give us the tickets for the game and coordinate with us when and where we would be picked up for the ride back home. As I handed over the second half of the ticket payment (\$80 U.S. for a face value of 20 Reais, or about \$11) something inside me told me not to pay him. He told us to meet him five minutes after the game near the men's washroom, at post 5. My gut said to not pay him until after we got picked up at the end of the game. That little bit of intuition turned out to be right.

The game, between two of Rio's local teams, Botafogo and Vasco da Gama, two teams whose histories go back over a hundred years, was excellent. There was lots of action at both ends, had the usual pathetic soccer dives—soccer players are such terrible actors—and had plenty of scoring chances. The stadium was about two-thirds full, about 60,000 screaming lunatics. Both teams were technically at home so the crowd was evenly split in terms of their allegiance. The energy was incredible. My heart started beating faster almost immediately. Isabelle really enjoyed

herself and wore a huge smile throughout the game. She even said she was going to follow soccer from now on she was so enthralled by it all. Though I gave her an approving and supportive smile I knew the flirtation with the game would end shortly after the final whistle. The game itself was decided by a late penalty kick, which I captured on my new compact digital camera, and Botafogo won 3-2. You would have thought they won the World Cup the way their rabid fans celebrated.

Five minutes after the game the little weasel tour guide was still not there. "I knew it, he's not coming," I said. To give him the benefit of the doubt we waited longer and then longer still. The final sign that he was not coming was when the stadium lights went out and the gates were locked.

"I guess we're finding our own way back," I said.

"It looks like it," Jason agreed.

After convincing the man at the gate to actually let us out we headed toward what we hoped was the subway station, cursing the little weasel all the way. We made it back to the apartment just fine, but I reminded myself to listen to my intuition more often.

Our last day in Rio was a rainy one. We had planned to go to the beach but all we were able to do was go to one of the ubiquitous juice bars a few blocks away and have some fresh-squeezed juices. Later we had a nice chat with Patricia and Pedro, talking about nearly every topic possible. Isabelle and Patricia really connected, both having interests in meditation, yoga, and India. Isabelle said it was a blessing that it rained because she was able to spend more time with Patricia. I rather enjoyed the conversation as well, feeling somehow more connected to other human beings after weeks of traveling with just one person.

Sao Paulo

I didn't want to leave Rio but our flight to Cape Town left from Sao Paulo so we hopped a rather cushy bus for the five and a half hour jaunt down the highway. Compared to the long and rough bus rides in Bolivia it felt like a first-class cruise. There was a toilet, plenty of food and drink, a TV, and the seats didn't smell of urine and sweat, nor did any of the passengers.

The city was very quiet. I reasoned that it was a post-Carnaval hangover. We made our way to a main shopping street and ultimately to a bookstore

called FNAC. It was like an Indigo-Chapters bookstore in Canada except it also sold all sorts of electronic gadgets. We were looking for travel guides on South Africa and Egypt, our next two stops. We were scheduled to go to Kenya before Egypt but we were investigating a detour as things in Kenya were still unstable due to a botched election there in December. Fortunately, we found the books we wanted and also found a cozy little café at which to sit and enjoy a short read, a relaxing conversation, and simply watch the world go by.

As we wandered through a shopping mall I spotted a movie theatre. “Do you feel like a movie?” I asked Isabelle.

“Sure, let’s check it out,” she replied.

We hadn’t been to a movie in quite a while and we weren’t sure what would be available but we were both in the mood to just sit still for a couple of hours and be entertained.

“I wonder if they’ll have anything in English, or at least with subtitles,” I said.

I noticed a poster for the Will Smith movie *I Am Legend*. I remember seeing the same poster in theaters in Canada months before and immediately thought that they must get Hollywood movies there much later than we did in North America. It wasn’t clear that the movie was in English or Portuguese. Isabelle went to speak to the lady sitting in the little glass booth to find out.

“How are you going to communicate with her?” I asked. “I highly doubt she’ll speak English.”

Before I knew it Isabelle was facing the woman saying the word “Inglês?” and motioning with her hand, as if to ask if the movie was in Portuguese with the English subtitles appearing down below. Isabelle was pleased when the woman nodded her head.

“Cool,” I said, “Let’s go!”

As it turned out the movie was in English and the subtitles were in Portuguese. Regardless, we watched a movie and relaxed without having to think about what we were going to do next. That alone was very much worth the price of admission.

After the movie we headed back to our hotel, Marian Palace, an Art-Deco relic that at one point was probably very chic but was badly in need of a renovation. As we walked I couldn’t help but notice the derelict buildings and endless graffiti, the many homeless people, prostitutes, and groups of young men milling about. I started to feel a bit concerned and

my heart rate increased. Isabelle walked noticeably faster and without saying anything to each other we knew we needed to get back to the hotel as quickly as possible. We chose the most lighted route we could find as the darkness descended. Looking ahead I was calmed by the sight of what looked like a group of police officers, on foot and on bicycle. The fact there were so many police told me that we should not have been where we were at night.

Nearly breathless back in the hotel room, Isabelle and I recapped our brief visit to Sao Paulo and decided, rather swiftly, that we were not likely to return any time soon. I was learning on the trip that sometimes even the briefest of visits could leave images in my mind; they could also leave feelings. Positive or negative, the images or feelings became implanted and, once there, were very hard to dislodge.

Africa

The great travel writer Paul Theroux, in his excellent book *Dark Star Safari*, described his incredible overland journey from Cairo to Cape Town with vivid imagery that left a lasting impression on me. He was traveling in Africa for the first time since living there nearly forty years prior and found it to be a very different place than his first foray there. He rather ominously noted, on the very first page of the book: “Africa is materially more decrepit than it was when I first knew it—hungrier, poorer, less educated, more pessimistic, more corrupt, and you can’t tell the politicians from the witch doctors.” I could not help but internalize these words and consider how they might manifest in my African experience.

I had seen the news and read the papers. I knew of the famine, the disease, the war, the destruction. I had seen the hopelessness portrayed in the infomercials and public television fundraisers. We in the west had all seen the images and thought we knew what it was all about. It was, for me anyway, quite different to hear someone like Theroux, a lifetime traveler and writer, who had actually lived in Africa before the mass media grabbed hold of the story, tell of his impressions. His view that Africa had slid into decline concerned me. It made me nervous for what I would find in Africa, for what I would see and experience. It was with trepidation I entered what Theroux termed, via the title of his second chapter, The Mother of the World.

South Africa—Danger after dark

Cape Town

We arrived mid-morning in Cape Town after an eight hour flight and four hour time change. Tara, an old friend of mine from Calgary who had moved to South Africa several years prior, picked us up at the airport. In tow was her two-year-old son, Kai. She drove us from the airport to her recently, as of three weeks prior, purchased home in Scarborough on the Atlantic coast and about fifty kilometres from Cape Town. I didn't realize how far into the suburbs we were going until we finally got there. Her new house was only a few minutes' walk from a beautiful, wide, though very windy beach. The house was a one-bedroom loft with no shower and only a few signs of modernity. They had moved from the city and their four-bedroom house, Tara told us, so that Kai could grow up in a safer environment.

Tara told us how she was doing some freelance writing and living a life of meditation, vegetarianism, and dedicated motherhood. Though fifteen years had passed Tara looked exactly the same as when I had last seen her: bright eyes, beautiful smile, creamy brown skin, and impossibly black curly hair.

As we talked Kai ran around naked and pissed on the floor. Kai's little neighbourhood friend Jo-Jo—a cross-dressing little boy with a mean streak—came over later to piss on the floor too and fight over a few toys with Kai. When Jo-Jo hopped onto our makeshift bed, a blow-up mattress on the floor, with his still-wet willy flying about I thought I might have a small heart attack. Isabelle and I shot looks of disbelief back and forth until Jo-Jo and his/her bohemian mom went home.

Tara prepared us a tasty vegetarian dinner of potatoes, tomatoes, and mushrooms. We then went for a walk on the beach, though only briefly because it was so windy our bodies were attacked by tiny grains of sand which, when propelled at excessive speeds, felt like little darts. We then went to bed and slept on a blow-up mattress that deflated half-way through the night, forcing us to then sleep all crumpled up on two small couches.

The next morning I struggled off the couch, a little worse for wear. As my eyes slowly adjusted to the morning sunshine streaming through the kitchen window I was greeted my Kai, a broad smile across his face. I looked around quickly to see that Jo-Jo wasn't there too and, thankfully,

he wasn't. Kai had in hand his toddler-sized guitar; the one he had played for us the night before. I asked him gently and quietly to put the guitar down as Auntie Isabelle was still asleep. Amazingly, he listened to me. *This parenting thing is easy.*

After breakfast Tara drove us to Cape Point where we walked up to the old lighthouse, built in 1852, at the top. I stood, steadfast against a howling wind, atop a most precipitous perch, and gazed out at the big blue ocean, pondering life . . . and what to have for lunch. On that spot stood the post that indicated distances to various world cities, like Sydney, Rio, and London. It felt strange to be there, not the real confluence of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans but the popular choice as such. It was still hard to believe that I was in Africa at all. I felt like a real globetrotter, having just come from Rio and knowing I would also go to Sydney.

After Cape Point, Tara drove us to Boulders in Simon's Town. Boulders is a sanctuary for the African Penguin, which I, until I arrived there, didn't know existed. The wind, again, was relentless and shortened our stay somewhat. I quickly snapped off a dozen pictures of a hundred or more penguins, mostly just hanging out, sunning themselves. Some swam but most sat still or snuggled with a loved one. The fact that penguins existed in Africa made me think about all of the human and animal migration on earth over time. I knew, intellectually, that migration had happened, but I pondered where the people that migrated came from in the first place. *Where was the origin of anything, really?*

We then headed out for a very late lunch, with the whining Kai and the very patient Tara sitting in the back seat as I drove—on the left-hand side of the road for the very first time. I struggled to maintain position of the car while listening to Tara work incredibly hard to mollify the young Kai, who did not make it easy on his mother. I asked Tara directions during the moments of silence, which were few and far between. Sweat developed on my brow and I was certain I left my hand prints deeply imbedded in the steering wheel I gripped it so tight. Thankfully there was little oncoming traffic and Kai remained quiet enough that I heard Tara's directions and we made it to the restaurant in one piece.

After a delicious lunch of pan-fried yellowtail fish at Olympia Bakery in Kalk Bay we parted ways with Tara with big thanks and best wishes. We headed for the metro station to catch a train to downtown Cape Town. As we stood on the platform a rather unruly looking man approached us. He was black, tall and thin, and wearing clothes that looked like they had been

in a bar fight. I stepped in between him and Isabelle as he approached. Despite the fact it was broad daylight and other people were close by I sensed danger and within seconds my heart rate was at marathon pace.

"Good afternoon," he offered, slurring somewhat, perhaps from an afternoon of drinking.

"Hello," I replied, with a guarded tone.

"Where are you folks from?" he mumbled.

"We're from Canada," I said, avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, Canada. I've never been there. It must be nice."

"Yes, it's nice," I said with the best dismissive tone I could muster in an attempt to disengage from the conversation.

"You folks worried about your bags?" he said, pointing to our backpacks as they lay on the concrete platform.

Before I had a chance to reply he stepped a little closer, maybe only five feet from us.

"Not to worry, I'm not going to try to take your bags."

"I didn't think that," I lied.

"In some countries you may have a concern, but not here. South Africa is very safe. In some countries you should be worried, but not here. You're not worried, are you?"

"No, not at all," I lied again.

"South Africa is a great place. There is no other place in Africa I would rather live. What do you think of South Africa? You're tourists; what do you think?"

He was clearly rambling now. I wanted no part of the conversation and I wanted him to go away.

"Have you been to other African countries?" he continued. "You must think South Africa is great, right? In lots of countries you should be worried when a black man approaches you, but not here. You are fine. Your bags are fine," he rambled, and stumbled as he did.

"Yeah, South Africa is great. Listen, we're just waiting for the train to go to Cape Town. Thanks for coming by," I said as gently as I could trying not to say anything that might upset him.

"Zimbabwe, now that's a country in big trouble. Zambia too. Not here though," he continued.

Clearly he was drunk and had no idea what he was doing and I wanted desperately for the train to come. I kept looking over his shoulder, hoping

the train would arrive soon. He must have noticed the expectant look in my eyes.

“Don’t worry, you’re fine. The train will come soon. The last thing you want is a black man bothering you. White people don’t like to be bothered by black people. I understand that. You’re fine,” he went on.

“Listen, it’s not about black and white. We’re just waiting for the train. Thanks for coming by.”

“Fine,” he shouted. “I’ll move on.”

I turned back to Isabelle. Her eyes began to widen. I spun back to see what she was looking at. A train was approaching in the distance. *Finally!* I turned back to her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I want this guy to leave, though.”

“Tell me about it. I just want to get on that train.”

I turned again. The rambling man had finally gone away. He stumbled toward the approaching train. We grabbed our backpacks and got on a rather dilapidated looking commuter train, headed for downtown Cape Town.

We then took a short taxi ride down the strand and arrived at our home for the next five days; an apartment in Sea Point, owned by a friend of Tara’s named Sam. We never actually met Sam but she obviously was a spiritual person as her bookshelf contained many of the same books as ours: Deepak Chopra, Christine Northrup, Malcolm Gladwell, Jerry and Ester Hicks, to name a few. Isabelle was in heaven.

The next day we did something we shouldn’t have: we tried to go and do something at three o’clock in the afternoon. We shouldn’t have done that because the day was too far gone to try something without specific plans. There was no time for pondering or changing one’s mind. Efforts must be singular, specific, and timed just right, otherwise crazy stuff and disappointment may ensue—such was my theory. Despite this well-founded knowledge, we did it anyway. We attempted to go to Table Mountain. That was a *big mistake*. First, we took a cheap communal taxi downtown, which dropped us at the main bus station with no further guidance. We got someone from the information centre to help and he walked us to a place where we got overcharged to take another communal taxi (fifteen people in close quarters in the back of a Volkswagen bus) to take us to the cable car station. Part way up the hill the taxi driver said he

didn't think the cable cars were running because of high winds. It was nice of him to tell us this *after* we had already gone half-way there.

At that moment I glanced up the mountain and noticed that a cable car was on the way up to the top. In a brief moment of rage I yelled. "We're getting out!" and forced my way past the other passengers and out of the shitty little van, grabbing Isabelle on the way. About a dozen people were trying to cram themselves into the VW but I burst through, yelling at the driver that the cable car was working so therefore we were getting out, and thanks for nothing. Despite the fact that the sign indicating the way to the cable car was only a few metres away it was actually about a half-hour walk, mostly straight up, to get to the station.

Sadly, the sign at the final ascent indicated that the station was closed. I asked the park guard nearby if it really was closed and he said he wasn't sure because he had just started his shift. What those two things had to do with each other I had no idea but we decided to press on (mostly out of spite) no matter what, despite the obvious signs from the universe to the contrary. The guard offered us advice to cut through the brush using a walking path instead of taking the winding pavement road, thus supposedly saving us quite a bit of time. Effectively, it was a detour.

Despite all good sense—or what was left of it—we took the path. In the back of my pea brain I knew we were going to be scratching and clawing our way up the hill, over rocks and through bone-dry scrub brush, but I was in such a defiant mood that I kept going anyway. We encountered enormous spiders—the kind that could rip your head clean off—and other nasty bugs and creatures of ill repute, all of which caused us to have to walk *around* them and therefore inflict more damage on our legs. Exactly what I thought would happen, did. After what seemed like hours we emerged, badly scathed and scratched by heavy brush and acacia trees, at the station. We were thirsty, sweaty, angry, bleeding profusely, and generally not in a good mood. Hoping against hope I went to the ticket office.

As expected, it was closed—due to high winds. I was too angry and too tired to even respond. I simply limped away to the concession stand to get some much needed water. I sat down, shoulders slumped, defeated. I gulped the water, and pondered what had just happened. I took in several deep breaths and thought what an idiot I was for dragging Isabelle through the brush in the hopes that all the previous signs were wrong.

Gradually the anger started to leave me. The feeling of defiance started to melt away.

We took a taxi from the station straight home. On the way I could muster only a few words to Isabelle: "Sweetie, I know I've said this before but I really have to get it off my chest. We should always try to get straight to attractions and events directly by taxi when possible and not mess around trying to save a couple of bucks because it ends up costing us more time and aggravation." Okay, it was more than a few words. Luckily she agreed.

Up early the next day, we meditated for a while, and then headed off to the V&A Waterfront—by taxi. We went directly to the Nelson Mandela Museum and bought tickets for the noon ferry departure to Robben Island. We had an enjoyable stroll through the aquarium and had a leisurely coffee before lining up for the ferry. It was great not wasting time being lost and getting more frustrated. I didn't know why that had become such an issue with me on the trip. I wanted to make the most of my time and I didn't want to spend it trying to navigate without a map and trying to save a few pennies when my time was actually more valuable. Did I need to learn something from all this? *Did I need to let something go? Was I pissed off because I was not in complete control of my moment-to-moment existence? Was I pissed off because I was there with someone and not living the dreams of my younger self?* Again, I had many more questions than answers.

The ferry ride to Robben Island reminded me of the ride from San Francisco to another world-famous prison, Alcatraz. I'd always wondered what the thinking process must have been, or what the conversations were like, when the first person made the suggestion to locate a prison just offshore from a major city. It must at first have sounded ludicrous, and then the heads would have started to nod when they considered how difficult it would be for inmates to escape and survive the swim to shore.

On the hour-long ride around the island on a packed tourist bus the guide told us tale after tale of heart-wrenching misery. We saw the now-famous lime quarry where so many of the day's bright young political prisoners, including Mandela, were forced to extract lime for the building of the roads on the island. They were supposed to have dug in the quarry for six months but ultimately spent over thirteen years there. It was truly amazing that they survived.

I was still in a sort of fog trying to comprehend how—in the late twentieth century—such abominations could take place on our planet,

when the bus approached the prison. *That was it, the place that housed the actual inmates.* I got off the bus with a feeling of trepidation and anxiety. The sight of the actual prison made my body tense from head to toe.

Once inside our guide led us to a large empty room with only benches lining the walls. The entire group shuffled into the room in near silence and took their seats. I felt like I was at a funeral as I moved slowly with my hands held together in front of me. My lips were pursed gently as I looked only straight down; not wanting to see in the eyes of others what I was sure could be seen in mine. A stout looking black man, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, appeared at the front of the room and ever so quietly began to speak.

I was riveted, wondering what I was sure everyone else was wondering. He announced that he was, in fact, a former inmate, and member of the African National Congress (ANC). He arrived at the prison in 1985 and was one of the last to leave, on April 27, 1991. He was convicted of high treason, meaning he had some ideas the government didn't like. He told us how he and the others lived, where they slept, what they ate, and how they were treated. He spoke in a rather matter-of-fact way but I could sense his anger and feel his sadness. Our group of about forty tourists let out several collective gasps and we often shook our heads at the facts and details as they were relayed to us. I hoped, deep in my heart, the time he spent with us was cathartic for him in some way and it wasn't simply a case of a crowd forming to watch the smoldering remains of a train wreck.

Nelson Mandela's cell was just like every other inmate's: perhaps eight by six feet in size, a barred door and window, hospital green in colour, and life-sucking cold despite the hot temperature outside. It was hard to believe that one of the world's great and influential leaders affected change from that lifeless tiny piece of real estate. Questions started to flow into my mind. What would the world have been like had he not spent all those years in this hell? How would my life have been affected, if things there, half-way around the world, and before my birth, had been different? What if South African society had been just? Those were the types of questions that kept the fires burning in that part of my mind that must know; that must see; that must experience.

To my shock and horror I learned that there were still six guards from the 1962-1991 period still working on the island, including the manager of the gift shop. How was that possible? Wasn't that like Nazi war

criminals working at the Holocaust Museum showing what life was like at the extermination camps at Dachau or Auschwitz? I couldn't believe it.

Leaving the island I exited through the same gates that the former inmates did. A long, dusty, barren stretch of dirt led to and past a final outbuilding before ending at the ferry boarding for a trip back to the mainland. That was the walk Mandela and his compatriots took. That was the long walk to freedom. My skin tingled as I made the walk, wondering what they must have been thinking when they made it. What expectations did they have? Did the world change during their time there? What kind of society were they going back to? Had the country, and the world, moved past the horrible injustices that had befallen them? I felt each pebble and each clump of dirt crackle and crumble under my feet as I took each deliberate step. I moved in slow motion, my eyes closed as the sun beat down on my neck. The long walk was just that—long.

We spent the remainder of the day at the waterfront, perhaps the nicest I had ever seen, rivaling even that of San Francisco. We ate an early dinner at a restaurant called Balthazar; Isabelle dining on kingklip fish and I on cape salmon. The meal was absolutely delicious and was a great way to end a fulfilling day. Unfortunately neither of us could sleep that night in the humid apartment. I read a book until 2:00 AM before struggling for a few hours of quality sleep.

Sometimes I like to be a hard-core tourist and get on a sightseeing bus; the kind you hop on and off as it makes its rounds to the main tourist attractions in a given city. It's admittedly a bit lazy but it's an effective way to get around and see some of the highlights. Both Isabelle and I wanted to see the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town so we became real tourists and hopped on the bus not far from our apartment. The rain and low clouds put a damper on things somewhat but the gardens were amazing. I couldn't believe that such beautiful flowers and foliage could exist *in* a city. We enjoyed meandering along the pathways of the gardens and taking countless close-up pictures of flowers we simply didn't see on our side of the world. Isabelle was in her element and I was happy to be relaxing and taking in the colourful scenery at a leisurely pace. As I strolled along I began to think of the next part of our trip: the drive across South Africa from Cape Town to Kruger National Park.

Road trip across South Africa

Every once in a while I visit a city and *miss* one of its main attractions. When I tell people about my trip later they invariably ask if I went to see a certain attraction or well-known site and when I tell them I didn't they gasp and nearly fall over backwards in disbelief. Table Mountain was the major attraction in Cape Town that I *missed*. After the bloody adventure of a few days prior it seemed it was just not meant to be. I let go of it rather easily, knowing that on a trip of this scale there would be a lot of people gasping and falling over at my missed opportunities. It was time to move on to the next part of the adventure so we headed downtown to pick up our rental car.

Despite reserving a car with air conditioning we somehow ended up with one that had none. I was not interested in waiting an extra day to get a car that did have air conditioning so we grabbed what they had: a VW CitiGolf 1.4. While waiting for the car to be ready we went to see a travel agent, one we found in the yellow pages—the *actual* yellow pages—a decidedly low-tech yet very effective choice. We needed to book a flight from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to Cairo. It took nearly two hours but Carla, the uncommonly useful and incredibly amiable agent, managed to make it happen. We'd have to go through Dubai and spend a night there but that was the best of surprisingly limited options.

We headed out on a cross-country road trip with no specific plans and no reservations of any kind. The first thing I had to figure out was how to drive on the *wrong* side of the road (that would be the left side). My brief driving experience with Tara's car did not provide for much in the way of expertise. After a few minutes of fumbling and a few shrieks from Isabelle as I turned into the wrong lane or got too close to the meridian, I got more comfortable.

The first stop was Stellenbosch, in the heart of wine country. We found an amazing and inexpensive backpacker hostel called Banghoek Place. There were families and older couples there so it wasn't a typical backpacker dive. In fact, it felt rather strange to not be the oldest person in the hostel, as I had been on several occasions previously.

We went to Tokara Winery where we sampled and purchased their olive oil and Isabelle sampled nearly every one of their wines. It was there I developed a taste for olives, something I had hated for the previous 36 years of my life. There was no explaining my sudden ability to eat and

enjoy them. Isabelle couldn't quite figure it out either, suggesting that maybe the trip had created in me a strong desire to try and like new things. I would not have considered food in this respect but there I was happily devouring olives.

Knysna, our next stop, was about 500 kilometres away through picturesque mountain passes along route R44 and the main highway, the N2. On the way we stopped in Franschhoek, a cute town where we had a coffee and purchased, of all things, wooden salad utensils and a small African wall-hanging from a street-side vendor. I wasn't sure we'd ever use the spoons and had no idea where the wall hanging would go but sometimes I did things that didn't make much sense—and that was one of them.

Bond Lodge in Knysna—an old, large, overly-Victorian B&B—was our accommodation for the night. Our host, in an attempt to give the place a period feel, had inadvertently made it rather creepy by putting out a garage sale worth of Victorian-era trinkets. She even hung an aged and tattered housecoat on the wall in the bedroom, freaking me out and giving the room a haunted look.

We had dinner at the waterfront and enjoyed the evening and the bright stars shining out over the water. We strolled back to the B&B on what had become a very dark street. We encountered a young man just in front of the gate to our B&B. He looked rather impaired and asked if we knew where a particular street was. I informed him we weren't from there and were therefore of no help. At that exact moment the lights of an oncoming car appeared to my left. Isabelle began retreating to the gate and I made a move to separate myself from the young man. As my eyes adjusted to the lights of the car he vanished, as though he was absorbed into the darkness. We hurriedly entered the gate and closed in quickly behind us. Something felt a bit strange about the whole situation but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was; something was just wrong.

We heard from the B&B's owner the next day that an elderly lady staying at a nearby B&B was assaulted that night at what must have been only minutes after we had our encounter. She gave us shit for being out after dark and said that it could have been us.

"I thought since we were in a small town it would be safe," I said.

"Nowhere in South Africa is safe after dark," was her terse reply. Lesson learned. A bit ominous, but lesson learned.

The next day we went to the Heads, a lookout over the entrance to a lake and the exit to the Indian Ocean.

"I still can't believe this is the Indian Ocean," I said to Isabelle. "I never would have thought I'd see the Indian Ocean."

The lookout provided panoramic vistas of the coastline under a cloudless sky. I took in deep breaths of the lightly blowing breeze and felt energized as the sounds of the ocean waves repeatedly met the large, jagged rocks.

We weren't exactly sure where to go next, so we decided on Buffalo Bay in Brenton-on-Sea. As we approached the beach area I swung the mighty Golf around a curve and into a makeshift parking lot, making sure to park under the shade of a tree. As we descended the stairs toward the beach a broad strip of seemingly untouched sand unfurled in front of me. It was one of the longest and widest beaches I had ever seen. It was a three and a half-kilometre walk to the tiny town on the tip of the peninsula and we crossed paths with only a handful of other people the entire time. On the way back I stood and closed my eyes to the ocean and just listened to the breeze as it entered my ears and felt the warm sun on my face.

"Sweetie," Isabelle interrupted my quiet moment with nature. "I'm thinking we should have a new affirmation for the trip," she continued.

"Great idea, Sweetie, what did you have in mind?"

"It should include something about learning, for sure. This trip so far has really tested me in terms of being uncomfortable and I know I'm supposed to learn something from that, I just don't know exactly what."

"Learning, for sure," I agreed.

If the trip was about nothing else it was about that; the experience of being outside of my comfort zone and attempting to understand what I was feeling and why. The entire travel experience, at least on some level for me, was a personal development exercise, with the world as my classroom.

After some back and forth we arrived at our new affirmation: "I feel good. I learn and grow. And good things always come my way." That affirmation would come in handy countless times as the trip progressed.

That night we had dinner at Carmen's Corner, on Main Road in Knysna and just a couple of blocks from the haunted mansion (the B&B). We timed it just right to be back while there was still light outside. We were a bit put off by the events of the night before and took heed to the advice we received about being off the street when it was dark.

"I expected this type of thing in Cape Town, but not here," I said to Isabelle when we arrived back in our room.

"I guess we have to be careful everywhere we go," she replied.

"I understand careful—I'm usually careful. Here, it seems careful means being scared most of the time."

In the morning we went downstairs for breakfast. There were only a couple of other people at the lodge that we were aware of but as we entered the dining room we saw a new guest. His name was Greg.

"Where are you two headed?" he inquired.

"We're going to Kruger by driving around the coast," I replied.

"What's your route?"

"We're planning to stay on the coast as much as possible, up past Durban, and then on to the park."

"Oh, that's a bit dangerous these days," he said with a concerned look in his eyes.

"How so?"

"Anything east of East London is very dangerous. Not only are the roads terrible but there are some awful carjackings going on. More than normal."

"Normal?" Isabelle interjected.

"Yeah, the rate of carjackings is way up in that area. Thieves often put things on the road—dead animals, trees, even themselves—so that cars will slow down, and when they do they get jacked."

"Holy shit, really?" I said, almost not believing what he had said.

"Oh, yes. If I were you, I'd stay inland and hook up with the N1 to Joburg."

"Thanks for advice, Greg," I said, still mulling over in my mind if that was the right thing to do.

"Where are you going?" Isabelle said, perhaps hoping to lighten the mood.

"I'm heading to Cape Town, and then on to Australia."

"Australia? Are you going on vacation there?" I asked.

"No. I'm moving there. I've been living in Durban for the past several months after I left Zimbabwe and now I'm heading to Australia to live with my sister."

"Why did you leave Zimbabwe?"

"Oh, it's bloody awful there. Many white landowners are dropping everything and just getting out. There's no point staying when they come

to your house with weapons telling you that the land is theirs and you'd better leave."

"Who is telling you to leave?" I inquired, rather wrapped up in his story.

"The Africans. They seem to think that they can simply take the land. They came to my house with machetes telling me to leave. I wasn't about to stick around after that. I got out of there."

He sounded like a man defeated; angry and defeated. I was thinking how strangely ironic it was that he was being forced off his land the same way many Africans were forced off when the white settlers came in the first place.

"There's nothing you can do about it?" I asked, almost encouraging him to fight back.

"The country's a mess. Inflation is out of control. Mugabe is a maniac. He's the one encouraging the Africans to take the land from the white settlers. There's nothing for me in a country like that."

I could see he was starting to get a little upset, and I couldn't blame him.

"That's amazing. In Canada we couldn't imagine what you are talking about," I gently offered.

Isabelle nodded her head in agreement. "I wish you the best of luck in your new life," she said. "We're going to Australia later in our trip and we're excited to go there."

"I'm excited to go there too. I have visited many times but now I'm going there to live so it should be very interesting," he replied, looking a bit less wound-up and more like a man ready to move on.

"Best of luck to you, Greg, and thanks again for the advice," I said as I stood up from the table and extended my hand.

He shook my hand firmly and wished us a great trip. Reminding us again to stay inland, and stay safe.

After some further discussion Isabelle and I decided to take his advice and agreed we would only go as far east as Port Elizabeth before heading inland.

Along the highway we stopped at Bloukrans River Bridge, the largest single-span concrete arch bridge in the world—to ponder a bungee jump; the world's highest. The bridge was 451 metres long and 216 metres high and, from a distance, passing vehicles looked like children's toys on it. We watched several people jump, and one guy change his mind at the last

minute, all through the zoom lens of my camera. Isabelle and I talked about jumping, took pictures of the bridge, talked about it some more, and then got back in the car.

Back on the road a baboon came rambling down a hill and scampered across the highway.

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed. “That was close! I could have hit him. In this little car that would have been ugly.”

“I’ve heard that baboons on the highway are a problem here sometimes,” Isabelle replied in a rather casual, knowing, tone.

“I can see why.”

Just like that the moment of excitement passed—as if dodging baboons on the highway was a fairly common and mundane occurrence in our lives—and we were back on our way.

We reached the small town of Cradock—a town quite literally in the middle of nowhere—late in the day. After driving around the desolate streets for a few minutes I spotted the Palm House B&B, something that looked worth checking out for our stay that night as both of us were exhausted and overheated from the long drive. The B&B was not nearly as scary as the lodge in Knysna but the pink colour on the walls, bedspread, curtains, and furniture nearly bowled me over as I entered the bedroom. Why must everyone overdo the Victorian motif?

As it was Valentine’s Day I took Isabelle out for dinner. Not surprisingly, there were extremely limited options for restaurants so we settled on a horribly named burger chain called Wimpy. Why anyone would name a burger chain—or anything for that matter—Wimpy was beyond me. Regardless, it was essentially the only place to eat so we figured we might as well go there and simply enjoy our dinner together. Besides, who would ever forget a Valentine’s dinner in a romantic town like Cradock and a wonderful restaurant called Wimpy?

As I drove the next day I was struck by the landscape. It reminded me very much of the landscape in Western Canada: long, flat, mostly featureless prairie. There were a few hills to navigate here and there but it was essentially a straight shot on a long, steaming hot highway. Not knowing where to stop next we randomly selected the fine town of Kroonstad, about 630 kilometres from Cradock. We stayed at 70 on Reitz, a pleasant old guest house B&B that, thankfully, had no pink curtains, sheets or walls, and there were no creepy Victorian trinkets scattered about the room to freak me out.

We spent about two hours at an Internet café (that is to say, a dusty room with plastic chairs and cheap tables and maybe four or five rather aged computers) run by a friendly gentleman named Andre. He was grey-haired yet athletic looking, maybe sixty years old, and simply could not stop talking about diving. He was, apparently, a diving instructor, and had about 3,000 hours of experience. He was very nice to us, giving us a discount on the Internet access, and had a little tip on a great place to dive “where Egypt and Israel meet.”

We stopped the next evening at the Domba Guest House in Komatipoort, after another long day’s drive. We were then about eight kilometres from the Crocodile Gate entrance to Kruger National Park, the final destination of our cross-country trek. We were heading into the park the next day with no set plan.

To get to Crocodile Gate we had to drive across the Crocodile River, which had flooded the bridge by about three or four inches. I had Bolivian flashbacks as we crossed—the mud-filled experience I hoped to never have to go through again in my lifetime—but thankfully the bridge was made of cement and our tiny little VW made it through without incident. We drove to Lower Sabie Rest Camp to try to find accommodations for the night.

The man working the counter at Lower Sabie, whose name I wouldn’t even attempt to pronounce, was a breath of fresh air for me. For the first time in 46 days I had encountered someone other than Isabelle who actually understood my smart-assed humour. After a few moments of surprisingly animated banter he gave me the bad news: there was no accommodation in Lower Sabie until the next night; so we moved on.

We spent the day in the car cruising slowly along the road system within the park, observing the wildlife up close and personal. I’d never seen such a concentration and diversity of animals in my life: impalas, monkeys, zebras, blue wildebeests, elephants, and even two lions. At times I felt as though the front windshield of the car was an enormous TV screen, tuned in to a National Geographic special—it didn’t seem that I was actually there, *in Africa*.

I tracked one elephant for several minutes as he lumbered through the brush. He was at least ten feet high at the shoulder and must have been about fifty years old. His tusks were six feet long if they were an inch. His massive ears drooped and flapped and his crusty-looking skin wrinkled and sagged as he walked; he seemed prehistoric.

I got an amazing natural high as we created our own random game drive and gawked at some of nature's wonders. I must have said to Isabelle, "Look, over there!" a hundred times. Just knowing the animals were free to roam and not trapped within a zoo enclosure somehow made me appreciate them more. I considered that they were still very much on display for tourists like us but I appreciated them so much more anyway.

Later, we arrived at the Satara Rest Camp where we would stay that night. Our bungalow there was a small, circular, thatch-roofed stone structure that looked like the tip of a very large pencil, if it were buried vertically in the ground, with only the eraser still protruding. The camp was peaceful and motionless as most visitors had gone inside to their air conditioning. Our single beds were rather small but we made the best of it. Both Isabelle and I had struggled to get a good night's sleep for the previous couple of weeks so we looked at sleeping apart, for the first time on the trip, as a good thing.

The sunrise drive for game viewing had us up extremely early. In the pitch black of very early morning we lined up at the rest camp gate behind a dozen or so other cars anxious to be let out. When the gate finally opened the cars exploded out as if at the start of a Formula 1 race, then slowed to the very reasonable posted speed limit. We saw baboons, buffalo, hippos, and rhinos, all for the first time, and all by 8:00 AM.

We returned to check out of our bungalow and drove, slowly, observantly, to Lower Sabie where we checked into our *hut*. Unlike the *bungalow*, which was really a hut, the hut was nothing more than an old, smelly, army barrack. It had a communal toilet and shower, though we did have a fairly large room with three single beds and a fridge. It was too hot to do anything after lunch so I had a much needed nap while Isabelle read *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

In the early evening we went on a sunset drive, this time with a group in an open 20-seater truck and a guide, Eliab, who carried with him a loaded shotgun. The sunset was beautiful and brought out intense colours in the grasses and trees. The drive was a bit more than three hours and we saw hyenas, including a few very young ones, hippos out of water, white rhinos up close, and the Fish Eagle for the first time. We were able to spot animals in the total darkness by using spotlights on the truck so see their shining eyes. Again, I struggled to consider where I was, actually *in Africa*. These images could have been on TV, or in a magazine, but they weren't.

I was taking in the experience through my senses but my senses seemed somehow dulled.

The next day we went on a sunrise drive with the same guide and truck as the sunset drive the night before. It was rather uneventful until the last half hour or so. Someone had spotted a giraffe in the distance—not a big deal after having been there awhile—but something was different. The giraffe approached our vehicle like no other had. Was she trying to get us to leave? To scare us off? Suddenly I spotted a hyena close to the tree that the giraffe had just come from. Someone shouted that they saw another hyena behind a bush about twenty feet to the left. The giraffe then retreated to the tree again, and the hyenas backed off. An older gentleman sitting behind me had binoculars and said that he had seen something else at the base of the tree and it didn't look like a hyena.

He then said to the guide, "The giraffe won't leave the area around the tree. Maybe she has a baby there?"

A collective *Ahh* went through the group.

I took a look through his binoculars and said, "If it is a baby, it's not moving."

Another collective *Ahh*.

Everyone seemed to figure out at the same moment that if it was a dead baby giraffe the mother was trying to keep the hyenas away from the body. The elderly gentleman wanted to get closer to the scene so he asked Eliab to drive forward. Eliab was reluctant to do so but eventually he agreed.

We all watched for several minutes as the mother giraffe stamped her feet and galloped after the hyenas to push them away. There were four of them now, two more appearing out of nowhere. I realized at that instant how dangerous this place could be; two killers had appeared in the blink of an eye and were ready to feed. Had any of us been out there we would have been crushed and ripped open before we could scream. Suddenly Eliab turned the truck on, turned it toward the tree, and started slowly approaching. As we inched forward the baby giraffe's body came into clear view at the base of the tree, lying on its side, its long legs and elegant neck limp on the ground. A small gash on its underside could then be seen.

As we approached the mother giraffe retreated, obviously scared of the vehicle. As she kept back the hyenas began to move in. Slowly at first, one tentatively crept toward the body, lowering its powerful jaw under the baby's rear leg near its belly. It opened its mouth to reveal razor-sharp

teeth and in a split-second it ripped a patch of skin off the belly, exposing pink flesh underneath. The sound of the skin ripping was one of tearing cloth—a short, loud, powerful, rip. Then a second tear as the hyena dug into the spot these scavengers are known for attacking: the stomach. Within seconds two others had moved in and tore apart the belly, exposing and gobbling down slimy intestine and other organs. As they ripped and pulled they moved the body, dragging it a couple of feet closer to the base of the tree. It was the most violent and disgusting thing I had ever witnessed in my entire life, yet I could not look away.

I looked up and saw the mother giraffe, scared off by the truck but wanting to chase the hyenas away. Eliab started the truck and began backing up. As the truck backed up the mother giraffe moved in and scattered the hyenas. Eliab advised us that the best thing the mother could do was to leave and forget about it. We all nodded our heads, put away our cameras, and quietly, almost somberly, sat down. What a finish that was to what, up until that point, had been a relatively uneventful drive. I felt lucky to have witnessed such a powerful scene in real life—to have experienced something most people in the world never would—yet also very sad for the mother who lost her baby. As someone hoping to become a father that was a particularly odd feeling.

Back at Lower Sabie Rest Camp later in the day I sat on the deck at the restaurant. The wind was blowing on what had become a muggy, cloudy day. A few big drops of rain had spattered the deck around me but when the sun poked through the clouds the temperature rocketed back up. I savoured my second café mocha of the day and simply enjoyed the scene. I looked out across the Sabie River and watched two elephants play with one another. They were partly obscured by the tall grass and deep green-leaved trees. They jostled in the middle of the river, pushing each other and smacking one another with their massive trunks. An entire herd then appeared; large ones, small ones, and baby ones, all foraging in the grass. There I was watching another National Geographic documentary.

The scene on the river—the vast landscape and the frolicking elephants so close I could reach out and touch them—reminded me somewhat of the nature scenes painted on the walls of my local Second Cup and Starbucks coffee shops back home. For two and a half years Isabelle and I talked about the trip, most often in those coffee shops on weekends. As we sat drinking coffee and contemplating the trip I could not have imagined more beautiful settings than those depicted on the walls. This

scene, the real one, had now replaced the images on those walls, replaced those shelves of coffee beans and neatly packaged tins. Having now been *in* the scene I was sure I would never look at those coffee shop walls the same way again.

The scene, as amazing as it might have been, was fleeting, like a thought. It arrived with excitement and even movie music, it held me high for just a moment and then as quickly as it came it went. It became somehow normal; it wasn't new anymore. It had become part of my memory. To view it again I could look up from the notebook I was scribbling notes in, or unlock that view from my memory, even though I was right there and the scene still existed in real time. Knowing we were leaving the park the next day I sat on that deck for hours taking in absolutely everything and locked away the sights, sounds, and smells in my consciousness.

We stayed the next night at the nicest B&B either of us had ever seen: Zoo Lake B&B in Johannesburg. It was not at all Victorian, something I was very happy about. It was on a beautiful tree-lined street in a neighbourhood that seemed to me rather up the societal scale, though not gaudy or pretentious.

In front of every home, I noticed, were the ubiquitous high fences, gated entrances, and armed guards. I struggled to consider my own neighbourhood back home with similar security measures. I pictured a gate and high fence in front of my house—the image seemed ludicrous. I pondered what it must be like to live in a society where everyone who had an asset chose to, or was forced to, protect it that way. I suddenly felt extremely grateful to be living in Canada.

Silvy, the owner of the B&B, was a tiny and energetic woman in her mid-fifties, and she and Isabelle hit it off right away. They went off chatting about all sorts of things while I rummaged around the room getting acquainted with the place. Later we took a dip in the pool, lounged on the deck reading magazines, and enjoyed a nice shower in the beautiful ensuite bathroom. I felt like I was living a luxurious lifestyle, until I thought again about the near-prison I was in. Cameras were mounted throughout the property, the walls were so high I felt like I was in a box, and I knew there was a rather large and scary looking man out front with a handgun at this side. Some things are harder to get used to than others. Thankfully I didn't have to get used to that for very long.

Our time in Johannesburg was extremely limited after our cross-country journey so we only had time for a brief trip to the African Arts Market at

Rosebank Mall and a quick dinner before retiring for the night. I knew I was going to get in shit from my friends back home for only spending a few hours in Johannesburg but that was the way that particular cookie crumbled. I had traveled across South Africa in a tiny little VW car with no air conditioning and seen both the usual and extremely unusual in a complex country and it was time to take the next step on the adventure. A step that, like many things on the journey, would not go exactly as planned.

In the course of my time in South Africa I was struck by something during a lucid moment of reflection that somehow put context to the complex and often opposed feelings I had experienced about what life in South Africa seemed to be like, given my admittedly brief exposure. When I considered what I had seen I was reminded of the movie *Isabelle* and I had seen saw when we were in Sao Paulo, *I am Legend*, starring Will Smith. Save the idea that Will Smith was the only surviving human in the world, the analogy hit me that, just like in the movie, everything changed when night fell.

In the movie, all the undead creatures come out at night; at the split-second that the sun went down. It seemed to me that in South Africa it wasn't much different. When night fell, the streets would empty and seemingly all signs of life would disappear into the darkness. People were either inside, in cars, or on their way home. It was acknowledged and understood that people simply should not go out on foot once the sun went down, and we were repeatedly advised against it.

As an observer it was a bit difficult to comprehend. There were rough neighbourhoods in every city around the world, to be sure, where it was unwise to be out at night, especially alone. But in South Africa the guidance was not to refrain from going out at night in certain areas, it was to refrain from going out at all.

Another unusual aspect to me of what seemed the usual functioning of society was constantly being asked if I wanted my car watched after I parked it. Every time I parked it someone materialized and offered to watch it, for a fee of course, as though it may just disappear if I didn't pay for the service. It was a creepy feeling being approached that way. Who were they supposedly protecting the car from; their friends, rogue bandits? Where else in the world did that happen? Why did the car even need to be watched? I could understand it more in big cities, but did I need this

service absolutely everywhere? Even in large parking lots with hundreds of other cars, in the middle of the day? Were all of these cars being *watched*?

It seemed to me that there was an acute have—have-not society in South Africa. It appeared you either had the expensive house, condo, or sports car or you lived in the shantytowns and townships and walked the highway with your thumb out. Many restaurants and stores, even B&B's, still had signs above the door that read: Right to Refuse Admission Reserved. In a country that had an unemployment rate of over 30% (nobody really seemed to know exactly what it was and the published rates were largely thought to be on the low side) there were bound to be some significant social issues.

The truly unusual part for me was that everyone behaved as though it was normal to have two different universes operating in parallel. At least from my limited exposure and perspective there were two ways of being in South Africa, and the tension was apparent—at least in me. It was oddly unsettling and I wished I could do something about it; but what? How could I do anything? What difference could I make? Why would I want it different? Who was I to want it different? Just because I was uncomfortable didn't necessarily mean everyone else was, did it?

Kenya—Hiding out at the Hilton

The next morning we were off to the Johannesburg airport for our flight to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. As was becoming our custom we arrived at the airport very early, partly because we had to return the rental car and partly because we simply didn't want to come close to missing our flight. We were going to Dar—as it is known, at least to tourists—instead of the originally planned Nairobi, Kenya, because of the violence that had broken out in Kenya a couple of months before during the national election in December. We had originally planned to spend a week in Kenya and booked it as such but decided to change our itinerary when it was clear that things had not improved in the area.

What appeared to have been a fixed election—one that had given existing President Mwai Kibaki a new term—caused countrywide civil unrest and led to over 1,000 deaths and 300,000 people being displaced. Stories and vivid pictures of fighting and killing in the streets of Kenyan cities, especially Nairobi, led us to change our plans and switch our

destination. At the airport, just after the ticket agent issued us our boarding passes, he informed us of some sort of error in the system. He said that our ticket number did not exist and that we needed that number to continue on. *How, then, was it possible to issue boarding passes?* Regardless, he and Isabelle went to the South African Airlines desk about a hundred feet away to sort it out. I stood there with our bags, unsure of what the hell was going on.

After an hour and a half of waiting I had had enough. Our flight was getting close to leaving and we still didn't have what started as a minor issue sorted out yet. I went over to the desk and asked where my wife was. Nobody seemed to know. I started to panic. "She was right here with one of your agents," I stressed.

"Oh, she is on the phone talking to your airline. She refused to pay," said one of the not so friendly agents.

"Refused to pay what?" I barked.

"There was a change that needed to be made and she refused to pay. Maybe you should talk to her."

"I'd love to talk to her but I don't know where she is," I said, keeping my building rage intact.

"She's on the phone, downstairs."

After trying to get clear directions I headed down to where I thought the public phones were. By that point I was sweating and struggled to keep our baggage cart from ramming into people as I raced by.

Where the hell is she? I frantically looked through every computer stall and phone booth. I spun around and headed back to the elevator to go upstairs to see if I had missed her somehow. As I came around the corner near the elevator I saw her, tears streaming down her face. My heart skipped a beat. I was so happy to see her but devastated to see her upset.

"What's going on?"

She went on to tell me that she had been on the phone with Air Canada, along with the agent from South African Airlines, and had concluded that when Air Canada made the change of destination from Nairobi to Dar es Salaam they had neglected to attach that change to our ticket, thus, somehow, making it look like our round-the-world ticket ended in Johannesburg.

The end result was that the only way we could get on the flight to Dar was to pay a change fee of \$250 U.S. to South African Airlines. Isabelle did not want to do that and was both irate and upset at the same time.

“Why would we pay a fee for something that Air Canada did, or didn’t do properly, and that South African would have had to do anyway?” she blurted out.

I was so confused I just wanted to get out of there. We then had three options: pay the fee and leave; wait six hours for the Air Canada ticketing office to open in Montréal and see if they could figure out how they messed up and rectify it, thus missing our flight to Dar and stranding us for who knows how long until the next flight; or take the original flight to Nairobi, which miraculously became an option after over two hours of messing around. The third option should not have been an option because we changed the original date of the flight so how is it possible that we could continue on using that ticket?

After some high-pressure deliberation we decided to go to Nairobi and avoid the \$250 U.S. fee that we both felt we were getting bent over a barrel for. Instead we would take our chances in an unstable country where people were killing each other in the streets. Our plan was to get a flight from Nairobi right away to Kilimanjaro or Arusha in Tanzania so we could get to Moshi, where we were supposed to be volunteering for a non-profit called Foot2Afrika. With the help of the same ticket agent who had been with Isabelle for the past two hours we headed to the gate. We stopped and bought him a doughnut first, and then headed onto the Nairobi flight feeling pissed off and not a little bit scared.

We arrived in Nairobi but before going through passport control we decided to check with Kenya Airways about their flights to Kilimanjaro. We stopped at the transfer desk and discovered that there was a flight a couple of hours later. That sounded good to us and we were excited by the thought of getting out of Kenya even though we had just arrived. For the first time on the trip I met a friendly passport control officer and he actually smiled. He gave us the cheapest possible transfer visa because we told him we planned to never leave the airport and just buy a ticket out right away. We then went to pick up our bags.

In a rare display of intuition I told Isabelle that I was a bit worried about our bags because of how late we ultimately checked in for the flight in Johannesburg. Unfortunately, I was right. Fortunately, we weren’t the only ones whose bags didn’t make it. There were about a half dozen other people from our flight standing at baggage services when we got there.

One of those people was a man named Stuart who was on assignment for the BBC covering the violence in rural areas outside of Nairobi. He was

a videographer and had been back and forth from South Africa to Kenya several times since the violence broke out two months before. Originally from Australia and now living in South Africa, Stuart was a father of two young children and he obviously missed them dearly. He was about my age but his eyes made him look older.

As we stood waiting for some answers at baggage services I chatted with Stuart about his job and the incredible story he was working on. He told me that the violence had quieted down in Nairobi and that it was generally safe but if we had plans to go into any rural areas we should strongly consider changing those plans.

He told me stories of working in Baghdad for several years covering what he called *the stupidity*. He said he had once seen a small boy, perhaps four years old, walking down the street with a human scalp in his hand. He said that when bombs went off in Baghdad they send in small children to find and collect the small bits of flesh and bone that had been ripped apart. He told of the many bodies he had seen on the side of the road, bloated with death. These dead bodies, he informed me, released gas as they decomposed and that had made him throw up several times with just a whiff.

Despite these horrific stories I was hoping that we could hang out a bit more as he was by far the most interesting person I had met on the trip to that point. He directed me to a service counter that could help with a taxi and a hotel and said he would be sticking around the airport to see if his equipment had made the next flight.

The odd part of the Kenyan baggage fiasco experience was that I had a nagging feeling for the prior two weeks—basically since we arrived in Africa—that something negative was going to happen to us. Things had generally gone very smooth for us for seven weeks and we often talked about how lucky we were. Isabelle often commented on how the universe had sent us angels at various points to help us out. I completely agreed, yet I had a tiny little feeling something was going to happen. My fear was that the thing was going to be the theft, or worse, that everyone in South Africa talked about. It turned out that the thing was an Air Canada error and some delayed baggage, ultimately sending us to, and keeping us in, Nairobi. Somehow maybe that was supposed to happen.

We grabbed a taxi to yet another cheap hotel, neither of us looking forward to what we hoped would be no more than 24 hours in Nairobi. We got into a grimy, smelly, dilapidated taxi that I hoped would hold

together long enough to get into the city. John, the driver, was a chatty man in his early sixties and claimed to also be a pastor.

"Kenya is safe once again," he said with pride.

"Is that right?" I questioned.

"Oh, yes, things are back to normal."

"I heard that the rural areas are still very unsafe."

"Well, there may be some areas that are not safe, but Nairobi is fine!"

"I hope you're right, John."

"I'm very happy to welcome you to my beautiful country!"

"We're glad to be here," I lied.

We spent about two hours in the cab—with no air conditioning—and inhaled literally pounds of dust and litres of diesel exhaust. No lines on the pavement made for general mayhem the entire way. After passing what appeared to be the worst of the dusty road (was there construction or an accident?) John took in a deep breath and said with a certain measure of glee, "Ahh, fresh air!" I looked at Isabelle and she looked at me and we both quietly giggled at his comment and then went back to sucking in the heavy diesel smoke pouring out the back of every single vehicle on the road.

The Sandton Palace Hotel in downtown Nairobi was not a 5-Star hotel, nor was it a 3-Star for that matter. I had expected something much nicer for our \$60 U.S., especially given that there were only two tourists in the entire country: us. It was no better than the terrible place we stayed in Uyuni, Bolivia, which was about the bottom of the barrel, but only one-fifth the price. Isabelle was, as expected, affected by the disgusting room. It smelled of smoke, the sheets were stained, and the suffocating humidity made for a pungent odour. Fortunately she held it together and wore most, but not all, of her clothes that night.

In *Dark Star Safari*, Theroux provided his opinion of African cities: "Urban life is nasty all over the world, but it is nastiest in Africa—better a year in Tabora than a day in Nairobi. None of the African cities I had so far seen, from Cairo southward, seemed fit for human habitation . . ." It seemed a harsh assessment, though I could see where he was coming from. He went on to say, "Like the person so poor and downtrodden he loses self-respect and any sense of shame, African cities did not even pretend to be anything except large slums." Could it really be that bad?

We amazingly survived the insanity of walking Nairobi's streets and managed to not get run over by the rumbling buses as they ripped past,

passengers hanging precariously from the door with limbs flying about. Pedestrians didn't walk on sidewalks per se; they just flowed together as a sea of bodies moving along what appeared to be a roadway. Of course the vehicles weren't really on a road either so it was more a combination of bodies and metal flowing like a creek and, amazingly, not bumping into each other.

We clearly were the only tourists stupid enough to be there so we got plenty of inquiring looks as we navigated our way around. There was a brief moment where I felt the need to explain myself to those prying eyes: *I didn't mean to come here, it was an airline screw-up.* Then I realized that nobody really cared about the story except me. In fact nobody cared about me at all. I was in their space, not the other way around.

For the first time in 24 hours I felt safe as we later sat in the Café American at the Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, just a few blocks from where we were staying. The craziness and danger was outside and a metal detector stood as a sentry at the door. I enjoyed a nicely concocted café mocha while Isabelle had her standard green tea and read *Memoirs of a Geisha*. I sat pondering Theroux's words, unable to get them out of my head. I had seen nastiness in plenty of places too, including cities I had already seen on this trip. Thankfully I would not have to stay much longer in this particular "slum."

After placing several calls to the airline they finally called us back at the hotel and told us what we wanted to hear: our baggage had finally arrived at the airport. We got a taxi—not John the pastor who pestered us to near death about calling him if we needed a ride anywhere—and headed to the airport. The drive was about twenty minutes, not the two hours it took on the way in. We picked up our bags and went to buy tickets to Kilimanjaro. Knowing what had happened to land us there in the first place I was worried about more mistakes and other things going wrong. Fortunately, everything went well with ticketering and we quickly booked a flight to Kili. I actually started to relax a little.

Tanzania—A helping hand

After a flight of less than an hour we were on the ground in Kilimanjaro. We hadn't obtained our Tanzanian visas ahead of time so I went to get them from the very dowdy looking lady behind the counter where the

passport officer had pointed. She told me that the only currency she would take was Tanzanian Shillings which, obviously, I didn't have. I asked where I could get Shillings and she pointed to the exit, past passport control, and said there was a money exchange booth there. So, without having to go through passport control, where they are supposed to *control* who comes into the country, we went out, exchanged money, came back in, got the visa, and *then* went through passport control. How much sense did that make? It seemed a bit backwards to me but it didn't seem to trouble them very much. In the end we got screwed for fifty bucks each for a meaningless visa. I wondered what would have happened had we decided not to go back for the visa and just left.

I didn't know what to expect of the Kilimanjaro airport but I figured it must be modern with plenty of amenities given that it was such a tourist draw for climbers and adventurers from around the world. I couldn't have been more wrong. There was absolutely nothing; only the unfriendly money-exchange lady. As we exited the building we were swarmed by at least fifteen guys looking to take us to Moshi. The rate: a mere \$50 U.S. *Didn't I just drop a hundred bucks two minutes ago on those useless visas? Now I was supposed to pay another fifty bucks to get to town?* I told one of them where we were going—Hostel Hoff—and asked if he knew where it was.

"No problem" was the reply.

I asked another guy if he knew where it was. He looked stupefied, as if I had just asked him to solve a calculus problem on the spot. His response was the same: "No problem." I guessed neither had a clue.

Every one of them crowded around, closer now, as if pushing forward to the front row of a sold-out concert, trying to figure out what the hell we were talking about. They all wanted to take us *somewhere* but had no idea where. I supposed the thinking was that one of them would get us in the cab and then somehow figure out where to go later. For the first time in a while I became frustrated as hell and a venomous anger started to growl in my belly. I was ready to rip someone's head off. I had just been screwed (in a non-friendly way) a couple of times in a couple of minutes and I knew I was stuck at that crappy little airport unless I paid one of them a ridiculous amount of money. Isabelle had a look on her face that said she knew I was getting angry and was ready to lose it. "Let's just get out of here," I barked out, pointing to one of them and flicking my finger as if to say: You're the lucky one today.

Fortunately I was able to decipher the e-mail we had received from the manager of the hostel, and the non-profit Foot2Afrika, Sarah, and I was able to compare it to the photocopy of the map from the Lonely Planet book I found in the Nairobi airport. We made it there safely. I paid the crazy taxi fare with T-Shillings (as they are known) and was informed by the driver that he didn't have change for what I gave him (what else was I going to get from the money exchange lady but big bills?) so he screwed me for a few more dollars. "Of course you don't have change," I said as I handed the cash over. "Have a fucking wonderful evening," was all I could muster without actually striking him in the face.

The instant the taxi drove away and I turned to see the place we would be staying for the next four days I felt my anger dissipate, my stomach started to un-knot and relax. We met about ten people in rapid succession—remembering none—and sat down for an extremely tasty meal of curried chicken and rice. We got the tour of the house, including two bedrooms with bunk beds for females and one bedroom with bunk beds for males. Isabelle and I were going to spend the next four nights apart. It was a true hostel with community everything; not like the B&B's we'd been staying at. There was the big house as well as a guest house in back that also had two bedrooms, one with a double bed and one with bunk beds.

We spent the remainder of the evening chatting with almost everyone: Ohad and his girlfriend Eli from Israel, only 22 and 21 years old; Karen, the longest serving volunteer after Sarah and from Ireland; Emma from Toronto and now living in Montréal; Carolyn and the other one from England (I never did catch her name); Sarah of course, from Ireland; Evelyn from Norway; and Mitra, from Sacramento, California, who used to live in the house but now had her own place in town. I took in so much information that night I had forgotten most of it within minutes.

In the boys bedroom I hopped into the top bunk on the left, pulled the mosquito net over me and drifted in and out of sleep for several hours. I had a bunk mate sleeping below me I had not met yet though I knew one thing about him without having to meet him: he wasn't afraid to snore incredibly loudly throughout the night. I found out later his name was Ralph and he was from Ireland too.

Mitra was a one-of-a-kind fireball. In her mid-twenties, of medium height and regular features—save her blinding smile—she exuded confidence and was one of the few people I had met on the trip who could

actually understand my sarcastic humour. She was an absolute pleasure to talk to and had something meaningful to contribute to every conversation. In the back of my mind I kept asking myself how someone so young could be so accomplished and worldly. She had a bachelor's and a master's degree but wasn't sure exactly what she'd do with her life. I was certain it would be something important and impactful.

She was a warm-hearted, down-to-earth, brilliant woman that would change the world, I was sure. She learned to speak Swahili in three months simply by reading a book in her limited free-time. She took no shit on the street when the locals hassled her. They likely thought there was no way a tourist like her could possibly understand them but she fired back comments in their language that stopped them dead in their tracks. It was a beautiful thing to watch. Instead of becoming a stuck-up, overeducated pain in the ass she chose to use her immense intellect and energy to travel across the world and dedicate herself to a cause she felt was enormously important. It was people like Mitra that inspired me to be my best and to make a difference.

Mitra and Evelyn counseled girls and women who had been the victim of rape. Sadly, rape and sexual abuse was a common occurrence in Tanzania, along with genital mutilation of both boys and girls. Like in many other African countries it was a common belief in Tanzania that sex with a virgin would cure or prevent HIV and AIDS so many girls became victims at a very young age.

Mitra was also putting together an event in Moshi to celebrate International Women's Day. She was selling beautiful and locally-made kangas (essentially a large imprinted cloth worn as a sari or wrap) in an effort to raise money for that most important event. Isabelle and I purchased a few of them to bring home as gifts.

On our first morning I ate entirely too much for breakfast and then Isabelle and I went into town to explore a little bit. We had a coffee at a little shop—real coffee, the stuff I can't really drink, so I heaped a ton of sugar into it, sipped it twice, and then put it on the table, never to be touched again. We talked about a potential donation to Foot2Afrika.

"We need to understand more about what goes on here and how things are managed before we make a commitment of any kind. It's not clear where the money comes from and where it goes," I said.

"I agree," she replied. "Let's find out more about how things work and we'll decide after that."

“Good plan.”

We paid 20,000 T-Shillings each per day for accommodation, breakfast, and dinner. It was a great deal given the quality of food and positive energy flowing through the place. It wasn't about the quality of the accommodations; it was about the fascinating people, positive energy, and the growth opportunity it provided.

In the early afternoon Karen, Gianna (from Seattle), Ohad, Emma, Isabelle and I went to Newlands Orphanage in Mvuleini (Swahili for Newland). Ohad and I played soccer and football (that would be North American football) with the boys while the girls had a typing lesson and then a lengthy talk about sex education. I played outside in the dusty heat for four or five hours with over forty boys aged three to sixteen. Many of the boys were not actually from the orphanage, but from the village. Many of the village kids, even though they had parents and homes, didn't live to the same high standard that the orphanage kids did since Foot2Afrika started helping out. Since then the village kids started coming over to the orphanage to play. Foot2Afrika volunteers had built rooms, purchased beds, brought water, and brought food seven days per week.

It was amazing having those tiny little hands reaching out for mine all day. They didn't care about the colour of my skin and within minutes they started calling out *teechuh, teechuh!* (teacher, teacher!). The young girls even tried to braid my hair! My hair was much longer than normal—I hadn't cut it in nearly three months—but there was not enough there to braid, that's for sure. That didn't matter though; the girls seemed to enjoy trying to braid it anyway.

That night my sleep was interrupted by the arrival home of my bunk mate, Ralph. I had heard from some of the others in the house that Ralph was quite a drinker and occasionally liked to hire prostitutes as well. Unfortunately, when he stumbled in he had someone with him; someone he was paying, as I found out the next day, about 5,000 T-shillings (a few dollars) for the evening. It wasn't until they were inside the room that I was jolted out of my sleep, meaning I really had nowhere to go without them knowing it. I was faced with an ugly situation: get up out of bed, interrupt whatever they might be doing at the moment, casually say hello, and take my leave (to go where?) or stay in bed and pretend to be asleep. Neither was a good option and I had no time to ponder. Before my slothful mind caught up to the situation it was too late—they were already in the bunk

below me, and things were starting to happen. The rickety, cheap bunk bed simply started rocking and there was no stopping it. I was stuck.

After some time had passed, things seemed to slow down. I couldn't sleep so I had no choice but to wait for the right time and then try to get out of there. There was no way out, unfortunately. Before I knew it they started whispering to one another. Was it over? Were they finally going to leave? After a few minutes of discussion they got at it again, the bed smacking the wall and my head bouncing on the slimmest of pillows against the less than comfortable mattress. This went on for several more minutes and again it slowed and eventually stopped. That's when I heard a loud knock at the window, just inches from my head, scaring the crap right out of me.

The windows in the house were simply bars with screens, no glass. The knock was immediately followed by some loudly and aggressively spoken Swahili. Whoever was there didn't sound very happy. Ralph's lady friend got up out of the bed and spoke to the man on the other side of the window, all in Swahili. After a few minutes the man went away, and as he did Ralph got up and yelled something out the window, angrily grabbing the bars. Just then the woman started to dress and Ralph spoke to her in a low tone. *What's the point of whispering now?* Suddenly the door to the room opened and a rather large and imposing man entered. I almost shit myself. What the hell is going on here? What kind of gong show had I entered? I figured the guy must be the girl's pimp.

He grabbed her by the arm and they went into the hall. Ralph, still incredibly drunk, sat on the bed. A few seconds later she came back in, said something to him and made to leave. Ralph stood up and they both went into the hall. Was this my chance? I thought they would notice if I suddenly appeared at the door. What was I supposed to do? Then I heard the toilet flush. I should get up now . . . fuck, too late, there they were again. They whispered for a few more seconds and before I knew it they were back in the bed and she was howling again.

All I could think about was the pimp outside. How did he get in? The guard, unless he knew what's going on, or was dead, should have stopped him from coming in. *If he comes back in again I am out of here.* Before I knew it the bed slowed down again and within seconds they were up, getting dressed. Ralph, still loaded, stumbled to put on his jeans, nearly falling over. The sun was coming up now so the front yard was alight when I looked out to see Ralph at the gate, saying goodbye to the girl.

There was no sign of the pimp, thankfully. *I asked myself, do things like this happen all the time here or is this Ralph guy a little messed up?* Considering he was here volunteering with young girls I couldn't help but be disgusted. I would have said something to him the next day but he wasn't able to get out of bed. There was some conversation amongst the girls in the house that maybe it was time for Ralph to go—if only he would wake up.

The next day we went to the Mnambe Waterfall with Ohad and Eli, our young Israeli hostel mates. I was a bit suspicious of our 'guides' as they showed up in a non-descript van, driven by every second local we had seen so far. The drive to the falls was a teeth-rattling experience as we caromed around corners and over what motorcyclists and BMX-racers would have appreciated as *jumps*. As we drove through the villages we received a warm welcome from local children who ran out through the trees and brush to wave as we passed. Suddenly we stopped. I looked out to see that we were parked at the side of the so-called road, nothing around but brush. The driver and his co-pilot stepped out, implying we should do the same. No words were being exchanged. *Is this where they slit our throats and toss us into the dense brush?* What are we supposed to do?

Thankfully the guy that seemed to be the leader told us that we had arrived and it was time to head into the jungle. Despite my initial concerns the hour-long meander to the falls from the 'road' was actually pleasant and relaxing. We saw coffee trees, avocado trees, passion fruit trees, river crabs, a chameleon, and the peace plant, so named as it is used when someone is looking for forgiveness from another. The giver sends the leaf of the plant via a messenger to the recipient to express their apologies. Maybe Ralph would offer me one when I saw him next.

The falls reminded me of Hawaii, not terribly large but big enough to create a chilling mist from a dozen feet away while collecting in a small, shallow, pool. The water was cold but that didn't stop Isabelle from walking in up to her knees while looking up and closing her eyes. It didn't stop Ohad either, who stripped down to his underwear and posed while Eli snapped pictures. The falls must have been over a hundred feet high and its falling water created a mist that made faint rainbows against the cloudless, blue sky.

Out of nowhere two young boys appeared, maybe six or seven years old, safely keeping their distance from us. They were intrigued by us, I could tell. They stared, and then looked away sheepishly as I returned the look. They seemed particularly taken with Isabelle and Eli. They

approached, smiled, laughed, and then darted into the brush off the path. Isabelle said “Hello” as they lurked near the path. One of the guides barked something at the boys and they jumped back into the underbrush. As we walked back to the van they followed close enough to see us but not so close to be scolded again. It was a fun game for them and rather harmless fun for us too.

The following day we went to the Kilimanjaro Young Girls in Need (KYGN) project just outside of Moshi. We went with the English girls whose names I never really got, as well as Eli, Emma, Isabelle, and three volunteers not with Foot2Afrika: Eddie and Ruth, a retired couple from Ireland and staying in Tanzania for a year, and Babs, a lady from Switzerland who was having a mid-life crisis and quit her job to spend four months in Tanzania. The project, started in early 2008, was based in a three-room house managed by a local woman named Anna Maria. Volunteers had recently built an outside shelter and installed a toilet. The tiny building was all that stood over a large and barren plain.

The girls were preschoolers, and absolutely adorable, or secondary school age, about 13 to 18 years old. Secondary school in Tanzania was expensive (primary school is free) so many girls don’t go, and end up at risk as a result. Isabelle and Eli volunteered to be goalkeepers in a spirited game of soccer while I planted a bougainvillea hedge along the perimeter of the property. There were no proper tools so I used a crowbar, of all things, to dig the holes. I lowered a makeshift bucket into a 40-foot well to retrieve the water I needed for the plants. It was a disgusting well, and an even more awful bucket, slimy with dirt and who knows what else. That same well was the source of the girls’ drinking water—something I tried not to think about too much. It made me mad that anyone had to drink water coming from a sludge-pit like that one.

Without any proper tools I re-hung a rather primitive looking swing for the smaller girls to use. They seemed to rather enjoy watching me do this, and several of them came close and snuggled up against my hip and reached up for my hand. I had six nieces and nephews back in Canada and I loved them dearly, but this experience was something different. Those little girls, who had never seen me before, simply wanted to be close to me, to feel my hand, to cuddle up to me. They seemed taken with the idea that a stranger had come to visit and help them with something as simple as a swing. Once I finished with the swing dozens of them rushed toward it to hop on and start swinging. Their beautiful little faces lit up with joy

as they swung, back and forth, one at a time. Watching them enjoy the swing as only children could I completely forgot I was in a truly desperate country and town with little to provide its people. My heart swelled and all I felt was pure happiness and love. The simplest of things had affected me more so than I could have imagined, and I felt so lucky to have been given the opportunity.

Isabelle, too, was impacted by our brief time there. She had a touching conversation with a very young looking 18-year-old girl that had a dream to become a businesswoman that would make and export locally made jewelry. She knew this was what she wanted to do and spoke about it with great passion and conviction. Isabelle connected on a very personal level when she looked in the girl's eyes and it touched my heart as I watched it happen.

"We really are the same, you know? We think, feel and dream the same wherever we are. We both have dreams. This counts as one of the most wonderful moments of my trip," Isabelle said to me as tears welled up in her eyes.

We left Moshi by bus on the Scandinavian Express (an odd name, given that it was decidedly *not* Scandinavia) to the capital of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam. The scenery was somewhat monotonous early on in the ride but turned to savannah and then palm trees and tropical plants. We met two Americans on the bus, Bob and Franca, who were headed to Dar also. Tanzania was the 93rd country they had traveled to as a couple since 1970 and they were hoping to get to 100. They were a lively couple in their late fifties or early sixties and had the energy of people half their age. We decided to join them and get a room at the Sleep Inn Hotel instead of the dive we had booked. It turned out everything in Dar was a dive so it didn't matter.

I was amazed at how I often looked at a city map and immediately envisioned what a nice place it would be, only to find that the place was dark, dirty, and scarier than hell. The map, it turns out, is the universal equalizer. A street on a map of Dar is no different than a street on a map of Manhattan, or Paris, or Toronto; it's just a street, with restaurants, hotels, and other points of interest. The reality is that you never know what you're going to find until you actually see that street in person. I had never looked at a map and visualized what a place might look like and actually been correct. Dar was one of those places; nothing was what I thought it would be.

After dropping our bags in our room we met up with Bob and Franca. They introduced us to two Brits, Victoria and Chris, whom they had met in their earlier travels. We all went to the Peacock Hotel, one of the few places in Dar that served alcohol. Dar is, much like most of Tanzania, Islamic, and therefore alcohol was not served (officially). Victoria and Chris shared with us an experience they'd had the day before with the rather corrupt police force in Dar.

Chris, a large, sturdy man with a no-nonsense look about him, was accosted by two police officers who said that it was illegal to wear the kind of shorts that he was wearing: a dark green, army fatigue style. Victoria, also rather sturdy and not the type to take any bullshit, asked the officers about the so-called law in question. One officer responded by telling them that their embassy should have told them that it was illegal to wear those shorts in public. Chris was dumbfounded by the ridiculous allegation but also realized where he was and that the officers, if they even were officers, sported guns. In the end Chris was able to avoid being charged simply by paying a small fine, \$100 U.S. in cash, to the rogue officers. Having escaped that little episode unscathed Chris immediately changed his shorts.

Bob, a former army officer (he was posted to Korea in 1970, the year he and Franca started their assault on traveling the planet) and former judge in the U.S., was a man that exuded control. His booming voice commanded attention and his smiling face and great storytelling ability made it hard to look away. He instantly became our father figure for the evening. His wit and charm were infectious, and were enhanced by his penchant for beer. Franca, the sweet and gentle motherly type, was a hippy at heart and shared her own versions of the many stories Bob told. Having traveled to 93 countries they had many stories to share and we could have listened to them for days. Bob's joke for the night was to offer the bar service staff positions at the U.S. Embassy in Burundi once Barack Obama became President. (Obama was, at the time, in the midst of a heated race with Hillary Clinton to win the Democratic Presidential nomination.)

After the others had a few drinks (I don't drink and Isabelle rarely drinks) we went for dinner at a terrible restaurant called Chef's Choice, or something like that, a few blocks away from the hotel. In so doing we did the one thing that we were repeatedly told never to do: walk the streets at night. We were told to never go out at night unless we were taking a

taxi from place to place, it was simply too dangerous. Whether we were in South Africa, or Kenya, or Tanzania, it was simply stupid to go out at night and walk around. Our friends at Hostel Hoff had told of a story involving a group of six volunteers that had gone out at night and walked back to the house. Not ten feet from the gate they were attacked by a group of men with machetes. One of the volunteers was slashed in the head before the group was able to scramble inside to safety.

So why, then, did we walk outside on the dark streets of Dar? Bob, that's why. Firstly, he wasn't about to change what he wanted to do simply because it was dark outside, and secondly, he had in his pocket, as I discovered later, a can of pepper spray. Pepper spray? How was that going to help against guns and machetes? I had no idea but we ended up walking several blocks in near pitch black, encountering along the way a handful of young men simply hanging around and doing nothing, and got back to the hotel in one piece. I must have looked like a secret service agent out there—my eyes sweeping from side to side searching for signs of danger and constantly looking over my shoulder. It was a draining experience. Would I do it again? Absolutely not.

Middle East

Dubai—Short but sweet

We got into Dubai at 1:30 AM on a layover flight from Dar es Salaam to Cairo. We had a fabulous hotel room at the Lotus Grand. I had searched for entirely too long online during the previous weeks to find a place and I finally gave up and just booked one that looked nice. It was expensive, especially on our budget (which seemed quite flexible by that point in the trip), but worth it; the kind of place we wished we could spend more time simply just relaxing.

It was really more of an apartment than a room; a very modern place with full kitchen, two bathrooms, and a clothes washer/dryer. When I saw the washer/dryer I let out a small yelp of excitement. “Sweetie, we can do our own laundry here! We can have clean clothes again!” I quickly pulled together a bunch of clothes that hadn’t seen water for a few weeks and started a load. It occurred to me a bit later that it was very late and I was going to have a short sleep if I stayed up for the entire wash/dry cycle. By about 4:00 AM I got to bed, passing out before my head actually hit the extra-large and extra soft pillow. How much better was this room than most of the places we had slept so far on the trip? Let’s just say it was a lot.

Morning came early after only a couple of hours of sleep. Still very much groggy and bleary-eyed, we made our way to the hotel’s ample breakfast buffet. As I sat at the table devouring my pancakes I looked up to see hockey highlights on ESPN on one of the many large TV screens in the restaurant. It was the first time I had seen hockey since December and it felt a bit strange to watch it there, half-way around the world in

the desert. I realized that I really didn't need to watch hockey highlights all those mornings back home because I'd now gone without them for months and I seemed to be doing alright.

We tried, against the advice of the hotel concierge, to get a taxi on the main road near the hotel. He had informed me that if we order a taxi it would take about an hour to arrive. "An hour? Why so long?" I inquired.

"That is simply how long it takes, sir."

In a moment of defiance I turned to Isabelle and said, "I'm sure we can find one on the street. Let's go."

It wasn't long before I realized I had made a mistake. Although it wasn't yet mid-morning it was almost 40°C outside and there was not a cloud was in the sky.

We walked around rather aimlessly for about twenty minutes and were in the process of discussing how stupid we were and deciding at exactly what point we should turn around when finally, luckily, we spotted a taxi whose light indicated it was available. We frantically began waving our arms as though we were stranded on a deserted island and had spotted a far off plane in the distance. Thankfully the taxi pulled over and I let out an audible sigh of relief.

Inside was our new hero, Mohd Aslam. We only had about two hours before we needed to be at the airport so we asked him to take us to the Deira Covered Souk District, a place we thought we could easily wander around for those two hours and possibly pick up a gift or two for friends and family back home. He said he had a better idea given that our time was so short. *This ought to be interesting.* I knew we were going to pay a lot anyway and since he was on the meter there wasn't going to be any negotiating, and the inevitable *misunderstanding* that came at the time of payment. We were willing to pay up to about \$50 U.S. for the two hours and that's exactly what we got. Not having to negotiate, or worry about an uncomfortable confrontation gave me a sense of relief I had not felt in weeks.

Mohd was dark, slight of build, probably in his mid-forties, and had a gleaming smile that was hard not to look at. He, like nearly everyone residing in Dubai—approximately 93 percent of the population—was not from there. He was from a small town in northern India and had come, like the others, to find work, over ten years prior.

"How often do you go home to India," I asked him.

“I see my wife and two sons once, sometimes twice, per year. I send money home every month, just like everyone else, to support my family.”

At the time of our visit most of the estimated 3.25 million Indian nationals working overseas were working in the United Arab Emirates, although many were starting to slowly move back to their home country, enticed by the booming Indian economy and equally forced to by the near doubling of rents in the UAE over the previous three years. The idea of moving to Dubai from India, or from many of the other nations that had supplied its workforce for many years, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, was slipping away as rents and other costs of living skyrocketed.

I couldn't imagine living away from my family for so long even if it was the only way to make a living. Mohd had barely seen his two sons in ten years—he said he didn't even know them. Could I do that? I suppose if I really had to I could, though I couldn't fathom the situation where that would be the case. The reality for these expatriates was that they didn't have a choice, and once somebody went, legally or otherwise, others from their village, or circle of contacts, tended to go too. It must be a strange feeling to be in a country where you are in the majority by ethnicity yet nothing about the place you live has anything to do with you; not the language, not the customs, not anything.

Our first stop with Mohd was to be the one that everyone makes when in Dubai—the Burj al Arab. I snapped several pictures of the crane-filled skyline as we drove to the Burj. I'd never seen anything like Dubai before. Actually, I had seen something like it—Las Vegas, minus the alcohol and hookers. Everything was absolutely massive, almost unnecessarily so, like Las Vegas hotels. I imagined it had something to do with the sheer vastness of the open terrain. There were few natural landmarks, so they built them. Cranes littered the sky, busy constructing some of the world's tallest buildings and most luxurious resorts. It was possible to build *out* there, but they chose to build *up* as well. I couldn't believe how brand-spanking-new the whole place looked and felt. I had heard that there were more cranes operating in Dubai than in any other place in the world at that time, and I believed it. Because there wasn't enough going on above ground, they were putting in a subway too.

Upon arriving at the gate to the Burj, Isabelle told me that she read that it was possible to go inside just to look around, but it would cost \$100 U.S. each to do it. “No, thanks, I'm alright,” I almost choked. We took a number of pictures of this incredible building and wished that we

could actually get closer to the marvel of construction. The only 7-Star hotel in the world, it sat just offshore on its own man-made island. At 321 metres, approximately 1,053 feet, it was the tallest building in the world used exclusively as a hotel, although the top floor reached only to 656 feet. I remembered seeing pictures of Tiger Woods hitting golf balls off of the helicopter pad that hangs precariously off its side. I looked at Isabelle and asked “What kind of people stay at a place like this?” She could only shake her head.

Mohd then took us to several more Las Vegas-like hotels along the Gulf’s shoreline. It was all too tacky yet impressive at the same time. The city essentially sprang up in the middle of the sand and now attracted millions of visitors a year to come and play in its vast wealth. I felt a strange sense of conflict within me as we walked around the shopping arcades of these mammoth structures. Knowing that so few people had so much there, perhaps even more so than back home, my moral compass was pointing me towards my pissed off zone. I felt the need to move on, so we did. A quick drive through other parts of the city—and there was no part that did not offer at least some view onto some construction of *some* kind—and we were back to the hotel and off to the airport.

Egypt—No, I don’t want a camel ride

Cairo

I’d thought about going to Egypt at least as long as I’d been looking at that old *Time* atlas. Landing in Cairo was truly exciting for me as I knew I was going to be fulfilling a life-long dream. Joining us on this leg of the trip were Isabelle’s wonderful parents, Anne-Marie and Gerry. They came from Montréal to enjoy Egypt with us for the next couple of weeks. We were so happy they could be part of the trip and spend time with us in that special place. They were truly amazing people and no words could express what they meant to us.

When we arrived at the hotel, a day after they had arrived, Isabelle spotted her mom across the lobby and literally dropped everything and ran to her. They both let out a girlish scream and embraced for several minutes. Gerry and I exchanged manly handshakes and Anne-Marie then grabbed me for cheek kisses and a big hug. I felt very comforted knowing

we weren't alone anymore. Isabelle looked absolutely thrilled to have her parents with her.

The next day all four of us piled into the taxi, a bright yellow 1982 Mercedes 200, and greeted our driver, Muhamoud with smiles and salutations. A heavy-set, balding man likely in his sixties, Muhamoud was very respectful and took great care in maneuvering the insanity of Cairo's streets to ensure we arrived in one piece. In some cases he was like the stereotypical student driver on most North American streets, driving so carefully that he was actually more of a hazard than anything.

Gerry had previously worked out a deal with him to be our driver whenever we needed, for the next two weeks. "You pay me whatever you feel is appropriate," was his constant reply. I had a feeling Gerry was going to get the runaround on that one and overpay by a long shot. Isabelle and I later in the week took a trip on our own and paid a regular taxi fare of only a few dollars. Gerry was getting milked for about ten times that amount, but at least he was traveling in style.

I first spotted the pyramids at Giza from a few kilometres away through the dark, dense pollution that hangs over the heads of Cairo's 16 million inhabitants. Even from that distance I could see their imposing outlines. They came into view as we got closer like mountains through a rising fog. I wasn't sure whether I was still breathing but I was in total awe. Even having seen thousands of pictures I was not, nor did I think anyone could be, totally prepared for the sight of the pyramids up close and in person. Their magnificence and power surpassed even the secret knowledge that enabled them to be there in the first place.

"Would you like a horse carriage to take you the rest of the way?" Muhamoud asked as he parked the car.

We all looked at each other and, almost in unison, shook our heads. "No, thanks," Gerry confirmed.

"Are you sure you wouldn't want to take a horse carriage?" he suggested. "It's quite a long walk. Lots of people take the carriage from this point."

"No, thanks," Gerry again replied.

I figured it out in about a half-second. The taxi drivers know all of the carriage drivers and bring their clients to them in hopes of some sort of kickback or favour. It was not a bad racket I supposed. This made me even more steadfast in my opinion of whether we needed a carriage or not.

"We can walk," I blurted, perhaps much louder than was necessary. My stomach muscles tensed and my breathing became shallow.

I suddenly started talking to myself, or least I *hoped* it was to myself: Why does this have to be a debate? Just let us be on our way. I know what you are trying to do here and I'll have no part of it. I'm not interested, can't you see that, or hear it in my voice? Please just let me out or I'm going to hurt someone. All I want to do is see the pyramids; let me do it the way *I* want, please.

Walking now, we approached the pyramids after rounding a corner. Near the entrance Isabelle uttered the unspeakable: "I thought the pyramids were bigger than this." That put me off a bit. I felt an odd sense of wonder and surrealism coupled with anxious defensiveness. Seeing the dozens of touts approach on the other side of the entrance I walked with my head down to avoid eye contact. "Do you want a camel ride?" was all I could hear, again and again and again.

The sky was deep blue and that, thankfully, made for great contrast for the many pictures I happily took. It occurred to me that one of the things I liked best about the pyramids was that I enjoyed the documentaries—where knowledgeable scientists and historians told me fascinating things and talked of new discoveries. While they were educating me there was something curious about it all, and I realized just at that moment what it was: they had nobody else around them, certainly nobody asking if they wanted a camel ride. *This*, however, was a different experience, for exactly that reason: *people* were messing it up.

Even the so-called guards around the site were in on the act. One approached me and told me, rather motioned to me, to stand on a particular spot while he took my picture with the Great Pyramid in the background. In a moment of defenselessness I agreed, and posed in a few positions that made it look like I was holding the pyramid, and balancing the pyramid, and the like. It reminded me of those silly pictures of people 'holding up' the Tower of Pisa. I knew it was silly but I complied, trying to enjoy the moment. Naturally, after he had taken a number of pictures he asked for baksheesh; a tip. I grudgingly dug into my pocket and gave him the equivalent of about one U.S. dollar. I wondered how many times a day he did that, and how much of a life that afforded him. One thing was for sure, he was not actually guarding anything, so it was probably a plumb job. As far as I could tell, the whole purpose of these "guards" was to shoo away children who were trying to climb the pyramids, and they did an awful job of it.

The suffocating presence of camel drivers and craft hawkers really got to me. Their sales approach was something I liked to call *repetition*. That is to say the hawker continuously repeated their offer until they broke you down and you begrudgingly, weakened, defeated, lifeless, finally gave in. It was perhaps the most annoying experience of my entire life, right in the middle of my dream. Who would have thought it would be so annoying being asked if I wanted a camel ride? It turned out, being asked every two seconds truly was a pain in the ass. In fact, I'd decided to print t-shirts that said "NO, THANKS, I DON'T WANT A FUCKING CAMEL RIDE!" and sell them to tourists. I could see it already; some other joker would start selling t-shirts that said "No thanks, I don't want a fucking t-shirt that says NO THANKS, I DON'T WANT A FUCKING CAMEL RIDE!"

Zoser's Step Pyramid at Saqqara, not far from Giza, was our next stop. Mostly free of the hawkers the site was very serene and offered up the first pyramid ever constructed anywhere in the world, pre-dating the pyramids at Giza. Its simple construction still amazed in the present day, reaching several hundred feet into the air. It was unearthed in the 1920's and was still being reconstructed. One has to wonder why it takes 90 years (and counting) to do this when it may have taken less time to build it in the first place. I got the feeling there was a reason these things took such a long time and it may have something to do with money.

The area around the pyramid contained several temples, tombs, and a vast area of archeological camps where exploration for even more discoveries continued. The plain was cordoned off into dozens of these camps; old rickety sticks held up ragged tarps flapping in the warm breeze. I was suddenly struck with thoughts of the Indiana Jones movies.

Back at the business centre of the Concorde Hotel the next day Gerry struck up a conversation with Raouf, whom I eventually called *The Reluctant Travel Agent*. We wanted to get to Luxor in order to get on a Nile cruise to Aswan, and see all the sights along the way. Raouf provided us the basic information but was not very forthcoming with the details. He introduced me to what I would come to know as the famous Egyptian double-talk—an extremely frustrating form of quasi-communication that would come to symbolize my Egyptian experience. The double-talk took many forms and reared its ugly head in any and all situations. Seemingly innocuous conversations turned ugly with the double-talk. Day or night it could come out with its teeth bared, ready to take a big juicy bite out of my ass. It often meant something like this: Yes means no and no means

no but yes and no means no and yes and no, sort of, and sometimes. 15 is 10 is 20 is 15 . . . each, for both. No is yes sometimes, especially when it's 15, each, and no, you know?

All I could glean from Raouf, in a rather circuitous discussion, was that he had booked a group of over a hundred Italians on a newer cruise boat for the journey. He said he may be able to get us on that same boat. I asked if he was a travel agent and he didn't exactly say yes and he didn't exactly say no. After a while I just gave up trying to figure out who this clown was and just focused on whether he could get us on that boat.

Later, Omar, the very official looking young man at the business centre in the hotel told me directly, the train tickets to Luxor were 300LE (Egyptian Pounds) per cabin. I asked him twice to confirm that this was the correct price and he told me with confidence, "Yes, sir, this is the price." I really wanted to believe him, I really did, but deep down I knew it wasn't right. He looked very confident, he was well-dressed, and working at a high-end hotel. I had to believe him, but I didn't.

As we stood at the ticket office in the train station I was proven, unfortunately, correct. "How much is it?" Gerry asked. I couldn't hear what the man behind the counter said, but I heard Gerry's shocked response: "What!?" I knew then that something was not as it should be, or as it was promised. Gerry turned to me and said, "It's \$60 U.S. per person."

Once again my wee little brain tried to compute how 300LE per cabin had turned into \$60 U.S. per *person*, a not insignificant difference. *Great communication*, I muttered to myself. Did I not confirm with Omar, a seemingly trustworthy source, what the price would be? Why had it changed so drastically? Did he make a mistake? Did he misinterpret the double-talk? Did he give us the double-talk? Was this clown behind the counter giving us the double-talk or just trying to take advantage of us? Fortunately Gerry had the money on hand and Isabelle was okay with the so-called miscommunication. I thought to myself how this could have happened. Then it came to me; maybe the 300 LE per cabin is the rate for locals. It was no consolation, but it made me feel a little bit better anyway.

Having secured the train tickets Isabelle and I headed to the Egyptian Museum, one of Cairo's most popular tourist attractions. Upon arrival a friendly guide approached us and asked if we would like a tour. I had heard that it made sense to hire a guide there as it was easy to get lost and metaphorically *buried* by the mass of information available inside.

“Well, are you okay with hiring this guy for the next couple of hours?” I asked Isabelle.

“Sure, let’s do it. It will be worth it in the end,” was her quick reply.

Our guide, a rather scholarly looking fellow of medium height and build in his fifties smiled broadly and advised that we were not allowed to have cameras inside so we needed to check them at the booth just behind where I was standing. I waited patiently in the line to do just that and didn’t seem to get anywhere so after a few minutes I came back to him and asked if there was a way to bring our cameras in, noting that we wouldn’t use them. He smirked and said that he could probably get us in with them no problem. We then passed through the metal detectors with no issues. We were in. There was only one problem; we couldn’t bring in water or other liquids, making my recent purchase of two bottles of cold water rather redundant. Where were we, an airport?

I quickly dispatched of the water and went back into the line. A guard approached me and told me I needed to check my camera at the booth. What? Didn’t I just get in here a few seconds ago with the camera? Now I have to check it? I looked to our guide and asked, “Why do I have to check my camera now when I didn’t last time, which was about ten seconds ago?” He looked at me, seeming rather stunned and confused. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. “You have some interesting rules here,” I muttered to nobody in particular.

After the tour our friendly guide tried to sell us some cards, audio tapes and other trinkets so I quickly dismissed him, preferring to remember the experience up until that moment, which actually was rather pleasant. Outside of the museum we then attempted to find a coffee shop but got hassled and befriended relentlessly. All I wanted to do was sit down for a cup of coffee in a basic coffee shop but I couldn’t step outside the tourist traps for more than five seconds without a number of *friends* asking me where I was going. This was followed by, “I know a place not far from here. I’ll walk with you.” My response was always “No, thanks.” Regardless how many times I said this it was impossible to get anyone to leave us alone. This made both Isabelle and I shut down to the outside world and in an attempt to escape it all we ultimately ended up at the Hilton for a sandwich instead. (This was the second time the Hilton had become our safe haven; the first being the Hilton in downtown Nairobi.)

The train station at Giza must once have been rather beautiful and imposing. The bones of the structure implied a once regal and magnificent

sight to passersby. Now, however, it lay not in complete ruin, but awfully close. Its dilapidated state was somewhat surprising given its importance to the tourist trade in the city and country. I was struck with the thought that we, as tourists, may have something to do with its condition. Tourists went through by the millions, and coupled with the millions of Egyptians that used it every day, it was bound to show the effects after decades of overuse.

When we purchased our surprise sixty dollar tickets we were told that they would get us the best possible cabin, the “most luxurious” in the country. I had my doubts of course, but I thought maybe, just maybe, I might be wrong. Unfortunately, I was not. As I boarded the train I was smacked in the face by a hot stench that reeked of sweaty clothes. As I fought off the burning in my nostrils I struggled to regain my balance and moved forward in the car toward our cabin. I took in increasingly small and short breaths, just enough to sustain life but not enough to fully experience the odor. My next thought was with Isabelle and Anne-Marie, two ladies that liked things to be clean. I couldn’t imagine what they were thinking.

Inside the cabin I looked for the upside—something positive to comment on—but I couldn’t find it. I looked under the seat, inside the sink and no matter where I looked I was disgusted. If this was the most luxurious cabin the Egyptian rail system had to offer then we had a problem. I was purposefully ignoring Isabelle’s comments, because I knew there was nothing good coming out of her mouth. Unfortunately, I could only ignore her for so long before I needed to acknowledge that she was disgusted also. My awareness shifted to Anne-Marie, who was saying the exact same things about her cabin, which was adjacent to ours and connected internally by a door, only she was speaking French. Gerry had the same look on his face as I must have on mine. The look that said: what have we gotten ourselves into?

Fortunately the cabins were small and we quickly ran out of things to complain about. Just then, Anne-Marie giggled her infectious giggle that broke the tension we were all feeling. Clearly, she had realized that though these cabins were rather disgusting, there was nothing we could do about it, and we’d only be on the train overnight and then we’d be in Luxor.

“Let’s make the most of it,” I said to Isabelle. “Your mom seems to have figured it out.”

Within moments we were settled into our *beds* and ready for some much needed sleep. After nine hours of intense shaking we arrived in Luxor.

The Nile—from Luxor to Aswan

The Nile Festival was a surprisingly clean and new looking river cruiser. I looked at Isabelle as she walked aboard and saw the look in her eyes. I could tell she was pleased, especially considering the state of the other cruisers we had to walk through in order to reach ours. That was a good sign.

The cruise boats are docked at least a dozen abreast against the shore, with their lobbies all lined up such that passengers could pass through however many they needed to pass through in order to reach the one they'd be cruising on. Isabelle's discerning eye glanced left to right, up and down, giving it the once-over. Her shoulders had dropped and the tense look on her face had nearly disappeared. A breath of relief escaped my lungs and I felt my stomach loosen. I was very worried this would turn out to be a disappointment, as so many other hostels, hotels, and B&Bs had been so far on the trip. I was pleased to know that Isabelle wouldn't be putting on all her clothes, including jackets and mittens, again before she went to bed.

At the front desk Gerry and I handed over our four passports and after some paper-shuffling ended up with keys to our rooms.

"When will I get my passport back?" I asked.

"At three o'clock sir," the desk clerk advised.

I noted that it was about 2:15 PM. Great, I thought to myself, I'll come back in 45 minutes and they'll have done whatever they need to do with it by then. What do they do with it anyway? And why does it take 45 minutes to do it?

The next hurdle to get over was the quality of the room. The boat in general seemed modern and had been kept in great shape, now I needed Isabelle to be comfortable in the room. I had my fingers and toes crossed as I opened the door. To my tremendous relief, the room was impeccable. It was a good size, had an ultra-modern bathroom and the bedspread (the most critical element of any room) was clean, crisp, and of a quality fabric.

I almost let out an audible “Thanks God!” but was able to suppress it and move quickly into the room saying “This looks really nice, doesn’t it, Sweetie?”

I dropped my backpack on a chair and spun to hear her response.

“This actually is quite nice.”

“Great!”

After settling in the next task was to retrieve our passports from the front desk. It was after 3:00 PM so I figured it was okay to go pick them up. Gerry obviously had the same idea as I saw him emerge from his room across the hall at the same time. We walked down the staircase to the front desk and up to the man who checked us in earlier.

“Hi, we just checked in not long ago and we’d like to get our passports now, please.”

The guy looked at me like we had never laid eyes on each other before and said, “Excuse me sir, who are you?”

I held back what I really wanted to say and tried, as best as I could, to suppress the venom. “We just spoke 45 minutes ago and you said you would have our passports ready.”

He sheepishly looked down at his desk, shuffled a few papers, opened a drawer, closed a drawer, grabbed the computer mouse and stared at his computer screen, all the while looking perplexed and confused.

Suddenly, and without saying a single word, he turned on his heel and bolted to the room behind him with the imposing sign on the door that read ‘Office.’ The door closed and I realized how vulnerable I was. I felt naked, helpless, and rather like a young child who was being manipulated by a parent to keep him quiet. What was he doing back there? Who was this joker, anyway? How hard was it to get a few passports? I looked back at Gerry, who was trying hard to be patient too, and shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know what he’s doing back there.”

As each second passed I began to seethe with anger. Finally, after what seemed like hours, Mr. Desk Clerk emerged from the office. I looked to his hand, hoping to find what had better be there.

Mr. Desk Clerk looked me in the eye and said “Sorry, sir, they are not ready yet.”

My first thought was to jump across the desk and throttle this skinny little man but I suppressed the rage once again and uttered a slightly more refined response:

“And why are they not ready? You promised me our passports would be ready in 45 minutes, and here we are, 45 minutes later, and you don’t have them. Do you even have them?”

Now, under normal circumstances, in normal places, which Egypt clearly was not, a straightforward question would be met with a straightforward response. I was expecting a yes or a no, followed by some meek explanation and some detail as to what would happen next. But alas, I didn’t get what I expected. I got the double-talk, the quasi-communication, the run-around.

“We are charged with many passports, sir, and if you come back at six o’clock they will be ready.”

As I tried to comprehend what had just happened, my stomach tightened, my heart rate jumped, and the bad words came to the precipice of my lips, begging to be released. Again, trying to make something happen rather than make things worse, I simply asked “Why is it now going to be six o’clock? What do you have to do that you have not already done?”

Mr. Desk Clerk sensed the anger creeping into my voice and chose not to acknowledge it. I’m guessing he had dealt with more than a few similar circumstances with other pissed-off tourists. “Six o’clock, sir. You can pick them up then.”

My only response, as I pictured myself in a disgusting prison cell in some barren corner of the Egyptian desert for killing this man, was to say “I’ll be back at six.”

Gerry stepped in to speak with Mr. Desk Clerk as I tried to cool off. I couldn’t help but picture Gerry as he reached out with one of his powerful hands to grab this little man by the neck and drag him out from behind the desk and toss him in the river. A smile cracked my face at the scene and I then let go of the idea of getting our passports until 6 o’clock, at least. I walked back to my room shaking my head and muttering to myself how I’d never get those past few minutes of my life back.

Later in the day, as we relaxed in our room, a knock came to the door. They were moving us to a much larger suite. As is the Egyptian way, there was no explanation but this time I didn’t care. “The cost is the same sir,” our porter told me, “but the room is much nicer, no?” Suddenly I didn’t care as much about my passport. Maybe this was a payoff for that little piece of service?

Later we met our guide for the cruise, the young man who would take us to all the classic sites along the Nile. Mahmoud couldn’t have been

more than 23- or 24-years-old yet there was wisdom in his dark eyes. He was a head shorter than me, was very slight in build, had a rich, dark complexion, and his white teeth emerged each time he smiled. Clearly he was a salesman, and had a smooth way with words, spoken fairly well in English. He sold us on the idea of seeing all of the sights along the cruise for 85 Euros *each*.

Our first stop was Karnak and Luxor. The first thing I noticed about Karnak was the huge line of buses in the parking lot. The second thing I noticed was that there were no touts attacking me the second I got there. The place was completely crowded but I was okay with it—nobody was trying to push their products on me, nobody asking if I wanted a camel ride, nobody asking for baksheesh for doing absolutely nothing. I felt strangely relaxed and free of the anxiety I had been feeling. I felt a wave of excitement overcome me as I realized where I was and what I was about to see. I had wanted to visit this site since I could remember and I was happy to do it without the hassles and annoyances I had been experiencing for what seemed like a very long time.

As we approached the main entrance of the Karnak complex I started having flashes of all those T.V. documentaries I had seen of the place. It all seemed so surreal and suddenly the chaos around me quieted down and my eyes affixed on the Amun Temple enclosure, famous for its 134 massive papyrus shaped columns. The hypostyle hall was the largest of its kind in the world and was large enough to contain Rome's St. Peter's and London's St. Paul's Cathedral. The pillars were even more imposing in person, and I struggled to maintain my balance as I leaned back trying to take it all in. *How did they do this? How did they erect these enormous pillars so close together?*

Mahmoud shared with us detailed information about the site and its history. As we were only a group of four he was able slip us into niches and around the crowds and obstructions with deftness and ease. I cringed as I passed by a large group of German tourists as they scrambled to follow and then somehow hear their guide as he belted out the information. I felt bad for Anne-Marie because she had the hardest time translating Mahmoud's English into her first language, French, and she didn't have the rudimentary knowledge that I did of what we were seeing. It was an awful lot to take in all at once and it was a good thing that our visit there was only a few hours because more would just mean more information to let slip out of my pea brain.

One thing that actually stuck in said pea brain was the need for each of us to walk five laps around the statue of a dung beetle to ensure that our dreams would come true. I thought for a moment that maybe this myth was one made up by the guides—they all knew each other anyway—to see if they could get gullible tourists to do stupid things thinking they were taking part in some sort of ancient ritual. They must laugh their asses off at us when they get together for tea or chat at guide conferences.

Karnak covers over 60 acres and was just too big to try to experience in its entirety in just a few hours so I wandered around myself for a while, going wherever my feet took me. As I did I had several flashbacks to Angkor Wat in Cambodia, for some reason. It must have been the size of the place, and the never ending stonework. It was a different feel though, being in a desert versus the dense jungle of Southeast Asia.

The comparisons kept jumping into my mind. I suppose each time we see something new for the first time our automatic response is to look back into the filing cabinet of our memories and try to find something similar that the new vision resembles in some way in order to give us some sense of familiarity and therefore comfort. This new vision lasts only a split second of course and then it joins all of the others in the filing cabinet, to then be compared against when we experience something new again. This process has always fascinated me. It was likely the reason I had such a desire to see and experience new things.

As we walked back to the parking lot I considered that perhaps the only way to see Egypt in a short amount of time was with organized guides. Tour companies had nailed down itineraries that made sense and left little planning or anything else to worry about. As a normally independent traveler I had a hard time with this but I'd come to appreciate having an Arabic-speaking guide to fight off the taxi drivers and hawkers.

Unlike Karnak, the Temple of Luxor is a much smaller site and is, amazingly, located right in the middle of a busy street, only metres from the Nile. In all those documentaries I had never gotten the impression the site was so close to the Nile and to the city. I guess I always thought of these sites as being off in the middle of the desert somewhere.

Dedicated to the Theban (it was during Greek times that Luxor was known as Thebes) triad of Amun, Mut, and Khons, the temple is perhaps best known for the two massive 24-metre high statues of Ramesses II and the pink granite obelisk at the entrance. Off to one side of the inner hall area is a 15th Century mosque, sitting more than forty feet above the

temple floor. The mosque was built on the still undiscovered Luxor temple so it was now possible to see where the foundation of the mosque sits atop the temple, forming what seems like the cross-section of a stone sandwich. The mosque was still intact and looked out over the temple floor below from what seemed a perilous perch.

Later I looked out at the East bank of the Nile, palm trees blowing gently in the desert breeze and the sun adding a soft red glow to the normally grayish mountains in the distance. I'm suddenly hit with a memory of the movie, *Death on the Nile*. When was the last time that movie was even in my consciousness, maybe twenty years? Again, I accessed the filing cabinet of memories to experience the present moment.

The next day Mahmoud and our driver for the day met us around 5:00 AM so that we could join the convoy of vehicles to the Valley of the Kings. The only way tourists travel in most of Egypt is by convoy. The government enforced this practice several years prior after tourists were attacked in the area.

Ancient Egyptians believed very much in the power of the sun and followed it closely. It is for this reason that all religious temples are situated on the East Bank (where the sun rises, indicating life) of the river, and all mortuary temples and tombs are situated on the West Bank (where the sun sets, indicating death). The Valley of the Kings is the most important area on the West Bank, containing 62 tombs, including the world's most famous, that of King Tut. Throngs of tourists head there each day (they actually have Disneyland-like 'trains' to take you from the entrance to the site) so any given group is allowed to visit only three tombs with their price of admission. We went to those of Ramesses I, III, and IX, the second of which is the longest tomb in the valley at 125m.

What struck me most was the proximity of many of the tombs. They were literally right across the 'street' from each other. It was like a densely packed neighbourhood, the kind where kids at Halloween go from door-to-door along an entire street within minutes and come back with a fully loaded sack of goodies. Some tombs were less than 25 metres from King Tut's yet were discovered over a hundred years before his. King Tut's was the only tomb found almost entirely intact and thus its contents lie in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The valley was like a moonscape—only rocks and sands are within view. I decided to take a walk up the rugged face of the mountain to get a better view over the entire valley. As I walked passed a couple of locals

I made sure not to make eye contact as I didn't want to engage in any conversation, I just wanted to be left alone. Just as I thought I was free from their clutches I heard the shuffling of feet along the stone path I was following up the hill. *Great, someone is following me.* Why would he follow me? I was just climbing up the hill to take in a broader view, what could he possibly offer me or do for me? Was he going to try to sell me something?

Within minutes he had caught up and I could feel him just behind me. Loose rocks kicked out from under my feet as I walked up a ridge, possibly making my pursuer have to dodge the falling debris. Why was he walking so close? It crossed my mind that this character was going to take me hostage or try to kill me. I decided that was the time to find out what his motives were.

"What do you want?" I asked abruptly as I turned to face him.

The eyes of a young, wire-thin, dark young man met mine and he said "It's a beautiful view, no?"

What kind of response was that? "What do you want?" I repeated, in the sternest yet non-threatening voice I could muster.

"Would you like a tour?" he inquired.

"I'm already on a tour," I responded. "I'm just going for a walk before I go back down the hill and move on."

He looked at me, as if trying to figure the next move in our little game of chess. He turned to the side, and swung his right arm out to the open view of the valley and said "This is a beautiful view, no?"

I began thinking to myself, here is a guy that is going to point out the obvious to me, over and over again, nip at my heels during my entire walk, and then expect me to give him a tip. Well, I wasn't about to let that happen. I didn't want there to be any confusion so I stopped him in his tracks: "Listen, I don't want a tour, I don't want you to follow me, I don't want you to tell me I'm looking at the valley when I can obviously see that, and I don't want you anywhere near me right now, understand?"

Unfazed, he looked up at me and said, "But sir, I can show you the way up to the top."

I turned to look up the hill, noting to myself the clearly worn path ahead of me, thinking that this guy couldn't show me anything I couldn't find on my own. I really wanted him out of my face, and off my heels. "I can see where the path is, thanks. I really don't need your help. I appreciate

the offer, thanks. I'm not going much further and then I'm going back down so you don't need to help me. Thanks again."

I turned up the hill and began walking, not waiting for his reply. After a few steps I thought I had won, I felt like I'd fended him off and could enjoy my walk.

"But sir, the path can be very dangerous."

"Not to worry, I'll be fine," I said without looking back.

Before I knew it he had begun following me again.

Holding back my rage I started to process the situation as logically as possible. It was just one guy, and he looked harmless. If he said it was dangerous he was probably just bullshitting me. If one of his buddies showed up I was definitely going back down. The stories Mahmoud told us about tourists being kidnapped and killed flooded my mind in an instant. I took a couple more steps and then turned again to fend him off. He was still alone, and rather meek looking. I decided on the spot I had reached the point I wanted to reach and I took my camera out and started shooting. The valley below was now in full view. I still felt like I was on the moon, except this young man was still crowding my space.

As I took my pictures he just stood there, like a deer in the headlights of a car, unsure what to do. I ignored him and kept shooting. He didn't make a move, and I felt a sense of relief come over me. My shoulders relaxed a bit and my breathing became more elongated. I'd had enough, I thought to myself. I put my camera away and started walking back down the hill. I fully expected that he was going to follow me as I passed him but that was okay. I kept a keen eye out for his buddies behind every rock and around every turn. Fortunately, nobody appeared. It was just me and this skinny little annoying man.

I picked up the pace, spotting the parking lot below. He struggled to keep up with me, stumbling and kicking stones down the hill. He muttered something but I couldn't make it out above the breeze and blood pumping in my ears. I blew past his buddies as they leaned back on the rocks near the base of the hill, taking in the scene. I turned one last time to see where he was and was surprised to find him right behind me.

He held out his hand, "I hope you enjoyed your trip."

I thought carefully about what I should say. "I told you many times I did not want your help, I just wanted to be left alone, and that there was no need for you to point out the obvious to me. Therefore I'm going to

leave now and I would appreciate if you would stay right where you are and not follow me.”

I spun on my heel and turned down the hill again. I quickly glanced back and saw that he had stayed with his buddies, apparently acknowledging defeat in this particular game. Yes, I had won.

On the other side of Theban Cliffs from the Valley of the Kings lies the Temple of Hatshepsut. The temple is important for many reasons, not the least of which is that Hatshepsut was the first woman to become pharaoh. Discovered in 1891, the temple is partly free-standing and partly cut out of the limestone cliff. Its three terraces were not visible from the great distance I arrived from. It looked like a giant harmonica lying on its side, dozens of square windows facing me in the distance. I began to see just how massive it was as I walked up the long ramp to the second terrace, one of the several remaining statues of Hatshepsut staring back at me. (Mahmoud jokingly called her *Hot Chicken Soup*, knowing he'd get a good chuckle out of me, and he did.) The throngs of people seemed so small compared to the building, and the vast plain on which it sits. Directly above the temple hung limestone rocks looking like they could tumble down and crush me at any moment.

When the Christians arrived there centuries before they defaced certain of the pagan god reliefs and painted their own scenes in their place. In fact the Christians did this in many famous places across Egypt; fortunately many of the original reliefs still remain. Anne-Marie and Isabelle sat in the shade beneath one of these Christian reliefs and I asked myself how it was possible that this image could be so well-preserved after all these centuries. At some point it must have been incredibly important that this image be put on this massive wall and there I was centuries later gazing upon it as though it were a mural on a modern city building.

We were back on the boat by around noon, our excursions done for the day. I meandered around the ship, in awe of the Nile and the dozens of boats around us. Salesmen in small boats down below were trying to sell their clothing to people on our boat, as well as the many others docked around us. They threw their products up onto the top deck to the waiting hands of tourists; all inside clear plastic bags for the return trip back down. Like many things in Egypt it was entertaining at first but it grew tiresome very quickly.

At Edfu we took a short ride in a horse-drawn carriage from the docked cruiser to the Temple of Horus. I learned, and it had become more

visually apparent, that all Egyptian temples were constructed in essentially the same way: a giant outer wall, called a pylon, or gateway, gave way to an inner courtyard, which gave way to a hypostyle hall (sometimes there were more than one), which gave way to what was called, at least in English, the holiest of the holies, where only the Pharaoh and the High Priest were allowed. This construction was very much present at Edfu. In fact, from the outside, the untrained eye might think that Karnak and Edfu were the same.

Built during Greek rule (third century B.C.) the Temple of Horus took a mere 200 years to complete and is considered one of the best preserved of all the temples in Egypt. The 36-metre high pylon is fronted by two immense granite falcon statues that made me shake my head as I tried to mentally process how they built such things back then. An interesting feature of the site was something called the nilometre. This is something present at several of the ancient sites and was used to determine the height of the Nile via an underground conduit to the river. As the river rose during the flood season the nilometre would rise, submerging a series of steps, one at a time. The higher the nilometre the higher the Nile; the higher the Nile the greater the harvest; the greater the harvest the more taxes the farmers paid. It was really rather ingenious.

The Temple of Kom Ombo sits on a promontory just steps from the Nile. It caught my eye immediately and could be seen from nearly anywhere on the river. The Temple was dedicated to two gods: Horus (the falcon god) and Sobek (the crocodile god). There was a small temple to the side of the main temple that contained three mummified crocodiles. Who would have thought that three ancient crocs, wrapped in linen, would draw a crowd so large I couldn't be bothered to wait in line to see them? There was also a small cemetery to the side that contained several crocodile coffins. I supposed they were there for those of us who didn't want to wait in line for the mummies. Kom Ombo was interesting in that there were two of everything: two entrances, two hypostyle halls and two ways to see ancient crocs; all in keeping with its two-god dedication. It, too, had a nilometre, a rather large and deep enclosure that was at one time connected directly to the river.

The only Egyptian temple that required a motorboat to get to—Philae (Agilkia) Island—at Aswan was our next stop. When the High Dam was constructed a few kilometers south back in 1971 to regulate the flow of the Nile (and replace the original dam built by the British in 1901)

certain sites along the Nile at low altitude were flooded. Philae was one of those sites. It was completely submerged and only after several years was it moved to its new, higher location, only a few hundred metres away. It was taken apart into 47,000 pieces and painstakingly reconstructed on its current site. Touring through the prominent Temple of Isis you would never know that it was not on its original building site. Inside, though, I could see on the walls that the temple was submerged because of the black stain on the stones.

A quick visit to the High Dam ended our day. A truly awesome feat of construction the High Dam holds some staggering statistics. Perhaps the most amazing was that by controlling the flow of the Nile it essentially formed a giant plug that created the largest man-made lake in the world behind it, Lake Nasser. The lake is over 500km long and 30km wide. The dam was completed in 1971 after 11 years of 24-hours-a-day construction by 30,000 Egyptians and 20,000 Russians. It's over four kilometres long and over 100 metres high and its construction displaced thousands of Nubians in the process.

Abu Simbel and the Great Temple of Ramesses II was a 290 kilometre drive away and required that we get up at 3:00AM the next day to catch our ride and join the caravan. I found it very hard to get comfortable in the shabby van, especially at that early hour. I couldn't help but think of the poor roads we had experienced in Bolivia as we seemingly flew down the perfectly flat highway at over 140 kilometres per hour. How long would this trip have taken in Bolivia? I shuddered at the thought. After nodding off a couple of times we arrived at the site. My first thought was that the place was as perfectly manicured as Disneyland. Every pebble seemed to be in place.

Very close to the Sudan border and sitting on the shores of Lake Nasser, the Great Temple of Ramesses II was, like Philae, once submerged. The site was sent underwater thanks to the High Dam and was reconstructed on its current site in the 1980s. Ramesses II was Pharaoh for over 70 years and had 150 children from I can't remember how many wives, therefore he wanted a grand temple—and he got it. It was most famous for the four statues in his likeness, towering 20 metres high, sitting at the entrance. No photos were allowed inside the temple so much is lost in my meager attempt to explain how truly stunning it was. The Temple of Hathor, dedicated to Queen Nefertari, one of the King's many wives, yet perhaps the most famous, sat nearby, and could also be photographed only from

the outside. It was an awe-inspiring sight for many reasons, not the least of which was that it had been reconstructed piece by piece so we could ogle at it.

Our “guide” on this journey was completely useless. Upon arrival he flipped through a small booklet showing the various scenes I was going to see in the temples, and then he left. He spoke for five minutes. We drove three hours there and were going to drive three hours back and that jackass spoke for five minutes. *Only in Egypt.*

Abu Simbel was the final stop, the final visit, the last stand, on the Nile cruise and I was pretty happy about it. I was looking forward to some relaxation and a chance to reflect and re-live some of the incredible experience. I had been thinking and dreaming about these sites for almost thirty years and I had finally seen them. I was tired.

Day 67—When I checked out of the Marhaba Hotel in Aswan—I obtained a 3:30 PM late checkout approval from the manager—I give the desk clerk my credit card. He started to charge me for one night plus an extra half-day. I had to stop him before he processed the transaction and told him that I had obtained approval for the late checkout. He did not even acknowledge what I said and went ahead and processed the correct amount. *Why would he try to charge the half-day? Why not discuss it, or at least acknowledge what I said?* It was like he knew he was caught and, like a child getting in trouble, dropped his eyes and went about doing the right thing. Did he personally get anything out of overcharging? I highly doubted it; it was just a charge on a credit card. No cash involved. Why nibble at this point?

The lobby of the hotel offered only marginal relief from the scorching heat outside. Even though I had checked out I had no interest in doing anything but staying inside, away from the hawkers. On the other hand I felt like I got ripped off staying there so maybe outside wouldn't be that bad. I didn't know whether the four-star rating the hotel had was actually out of five or not. My suspicion was that it was on a ten-star scale. All I knew was that neither Anne-Marie nor Isabelle were pleased with it, and that was bad news.

We had done essentially nothing that day except lounge around the lobby and worry over whether we were going to actually get the train tickets for the ride back to Cairo. Gerry had given the representative the money two days prior and the tickets still hadn't arrived. After four promised deliveries and two moderately pissed off phone calls from Gerry

(the man had immense patience; something I had lacked) the tickets finally showed up.

"I can't believe I gave a total stranger 240 bucks like that," Gerry said.

"In a way I'm a bit surprised they showed up in time," I replied.

"I've learned a lot about being a customer in this country, and trusting people."

"I have too. Sometimes you just have to let go."

I pondered our brief conversation for some time afterward. The culture clearly was very different from my own in so many ways, especially when it came to double-talk and the *nibble*—that little extra something people try to get out of you at the end of an agreement or transaction. It seemed that the standard approach there was to deceive, put off, and try to get more, no matter what. It was nothing but an energy drain. I had developed an appreciation for Canada during the ten previous days to be sure. With not much else to support the Egyptian economy I could only imagine how important it was that every tourist paid the absolute maximum amount in order to keep things functioning. It had probably been that way for thousands of years. I was certainly not the first person to come to Egypt to gawk at its wonders, nor would I be the last.

Back in Cairo, Anne-Marie and Gerry had left for home. It was a strange feeling knowing they would be back in Canada and we would still be traveling for three more months and many thousands of kilometers around the world. The brief time with them had been amazing. I had enjoyed their presence very much. They were supremely easy to get along with and I could tell they truly enjoyed the experience too. How special it must have been to travel with their daughter and son-in-law half-way around the world like that. I hoped I would be able to do the same thing some day with my own child or children. I saw the way Anne-Marie and Gerry looked at Isabelle those previous two weeks: that look of absolute love for your child. I wanted the same thing. I wanted to look at my kids that way and have them know how much I loved them, without having to say a word.

That first day on our own we did virtually nothing but lie in bed and watch movies. We nibbled on snacks in the *Club d'elegance* room, which we obtained access to because we had stayed for five days previously and were now returning for a night. Gerry and Anne-Marie took about twenty pounds of our clothes, trinkets, and gifts with them back to Canada,

and we were grateful they did because there was no way we could go on without offloading some things. It enabled us to have the right clothes for the rest of the trip. We certainly didn't need the winter clothes we originally brought for the cold of Peru and Bolivia. Of course Isabelle would have less to wear in the event she wanted to put everything on to protect her from the filth we were sure to encounter.

When we walked through the Ramesses train station, headed to our train for Alexandria, I noticed something different, something *starkly* different: *nobody* bothered us. No looks. No stares. Nothing. It felt quite strange, almost unsettling. I was so used to the opposite that I had grown almost accustomed to it. Now, in the absence of the annoyances and pestering I found myself a bit off balance. *Were we blending in? Don't be stupid.*

Reflecting back on the previous day, when we waited for the taxi driver to return with our train tickets, I fully expected to get screwed somehow on the deal but, other than taking such a long time, everything went fine. We got our tickets, without having to give passports, and even got our change back. That, combined with the strange experience in the train station had me thinking: *Was our luck changing?*

Alexandria

Overshadowed by Cairo and with much less to see than anything along the Nile, Alexandria is a bit of an afterthought for many travelers. Fortunately, it did a lot to restore my belief in the fact that not *all* people were out to screw me at every turn. Cairo and the Nile cruise were so touristic that I was hassled non-stop regardless of where I was. Things in Alexandria were different, much more laid back and non-aggressive. There was the occasional carriage or taxi driver asking for my business but after the first "No thanks" they pretty much left me alone. There were limited sights to see so I was not being hounded all the time to go see them. I actually enjoyed, rather than dreaded, going outside.

Alexandria sits on the Mediterranean Sea and its semicircular boardwalk called the Corniche encompasses its eastern harbour. For the first time in a long time I felt relaxed as Isabelle and I strolled along it looking out to the sea and chatting quietly. The women appeared to be much more casually dressed than in Cairo and much more so than the ultra-conservative south of Egypt. It was a much less hectic place, more

laid back, and more comfortable. That said there was something about the place that didn't quite feel right. It didn't take long before I put my finger on it: everyone with a penis stared, not casually, at Isabelle.

They stared as though they had never seen a woman before, despite the many beautiful Egyptian women walking amongst us. I wondered why it was that white women were such a fascination. Isabelle was wearing shoes, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a white scarf covering most of her head—hardly a revealing or sexually explicit outfit. It was young boys, teenagers, men, and old men—*everyone* was staring—long stares—the kind that warrant a slap across the face most anywhere else. I tried to ignore it as much as I could only because I knew I couldn't do anything about it. At first it wasn't too much of a bother but after a while it started to annoy me, and her.

Fort Qaitbay, built by its namesake in 1480, sits on the ruins of, and occasionally used the rubble from, the famous Pharos Lighthouse, which stood on the same spot for seventeen centuries before succumbing to earthquakes. The views from the fort out to the bright, almost glowing, blue sea were clear and spectacular. I closed my eyes and tried to envision the other side of the Mediterranean, imagining that it was only a short boat ride away. In my boyhood atlas it was.

The Biblioteca, the massive library built in 2002, is estimated to house as many as eight million books. It likely didn't have the same feel as the original ancient library that Plato and Aristotle studied at but it was awesome nonetheless. While there I read an interesting article in the *Journal of International Affairs*. It talked about the increase in popularity of religion in the developing world in the past century. The importance of religion in the southern hemisphere and its relationship to politics and international affairs was a critical issue in the 21st Century. A table in the article indicated that there are 175 million Muslims in India (16 percent of its population) and 64 million in Nigeria (50 percent of its population) and I was surprised by how big both numbers were. I obviously knew there were Muslims in India after partition back in 1947 but I didn't realize how big the number had gotten since then. How much time did I spend thinking about these kinds of things anyway? Nigeria, I learned, had a huge population that was expanding quickly. It was Africa's most populous country and was gaining influence in many fields.

The National Museum—which proved rather difficult to find in the confusing streets of Alexandria—provided an array of historical artifacts

and commentary outlining the city's history since its founding. Later, we visited the Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa, which was once home to 300 well-to-do corpses in the 2nd century. It is said that the catacombs were discovered by accident when a donkey and the cart it was pulling disappeared into a hole beneath the sand. If only other discoveries were made so easily.

Alexandria, in addition to being more relaxed than Cairo, was generally less expensive as well. We had dinner for two at a local eatery just up the street from our hotel one night and when the bill arrived it had only one thing written on it: 14. I wasn't sure what that meant as sometimes Egyptians charged, or attempt to charge, tourists in American dollars or Euros instead of Egyptian Pounds. I confirmed and re-confirmed with a few waiters who cobbled together enough English for me to comprehend that the bill was, in fact, fourteen *Egyptian Pounds* (less than \$3US). I couldn't believe it. I was so pleasantly surprised I subsequently left a (relatively) massive tip. In addition, online access in most Internet cafes was only two Egyptian Pounds (less than 40 cents) per hour. The hotel in Cairo charged thirty times as much. I could have spent more time in Alexandria, but alas, we needed to move on.

Europe

Cyprus—The Gap

The flight from Cairo to Larnaca was short and sweet. Isabelle's friend Katia picked us up at the airport. They had met the year before at a personal development seminar in western Canada and had since stayed in touch. It was tough to say how old Katia might have been as I knew she had a teenaged son but her face simply glowed with energy and made her look like she was in her late twenties at most. I could feel that she was a spiritual and centred woman, exuding a calmness that slowed me right down. Despite barely knowing Isabelle and having never met me, she had agreed to host us for a few days.

I could feel the open space and slow pace of Cyprus immediately. It was obviously well developed and clean compared to most of where we had been so far on the trip. Billboards showed real estate developments going up all over the island and foreigners were clearly the targeted would-be investors. People drove on the left-hand side of the road in Cyprus and somehow that seemed like the correct side again.

Katia took us to the old part of Nicosia to show us around. The old city still had the original city wall and many of the buildings were obviously several hundred years old, including the city's first church, which was later converted to a mosque. Its oldest commercial street, Ledra Street, was a pedestrian walk not unlike Stephen Avenue in Calgary or Calle Florida in Buenos Aires, only more compact. As we walked the sun went down and the temperature dropped to the point I felt a little chill; the first time I had felt cold since Bolivia nearly two months before.

Later on Katia's friend Jacovos joined us along with Katia's son Orestes. We walked along Ledra until it came to an abrupt end at the barricade that divides the city into the Greek-Cypriot south and Turkish-Cypriot north. It didn't seem like much of a barrier: plywood and lumber. To the left of the barricade, inside a guard post no bigger than a telephone booth, was a soldier. He couldn't have been more than twenty-years-old and had a rifle slung over his shoulder. He was *protecting* the border from potential invaders from the north. Jacovos, who had the look of a harmless troublemaker about him, asked the boy what he was doing and the boy said, "Watching." (The barricade came down not long after our visit and became another crossing point between north and south.)

Jacovos later told us that when he did his two years and two months of mandatory services in the Cypriot army he had similar tasks as the boy and often took naps to pass the time. He said he was more afraid of the captain of his regiment than of the Turkish Cypriots. The border gate was expected to be removed in the very near future, he told us. He and Katia both said that until recently the wall was made of large stones. It really shocked me to see such a barricade in the middle of a pedestrian street like that. One minute I was casually walking along, peering into shops and cafes, and then suddenly the street ended, a barricade appeared out of seemingly nowhere splitting the scene into two, not crossing our path at some well-placed, well-marked location but cutting directly into buildings on opposite sides of the street. It was like a scene from a video game: you entered a room, turned, and then suddenly you were directly in front of a wall. It was as if you were trying to navigate through a maze.

The north-south conflict started in 1963 when Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities clashed and as a result Turkish Cypriots withdrew to the northern part of Nicosia, amongst other enclaves. In 1974 the Turkish army invaded Cyprus and occupied the north part of Nicosia and much of the northern part of the island. A buffer zone was established between the two sides, a zone that was as few as a couple of metres wide.

The conflict, based on comments from Jacovos and Katia, seemed to not be much of one in practical terms. Most people, it seemed, saw the two types of Cypriots as essentially the same. Jacovos, it turned out, studied Turkish language and history at university so he understood the conflict intimately. No shots had been fired in years. Nearly 90% of the Cypriot population was of Greek descent but Turkey continued to send troops to the north to bolster its numbers. Jacovos told us that his friends

on the other side were more afraid of the Turks than they were of their Cypriot brothers and sisters in the south.

Jacovos even had a separate cell phone where his friends in the north could call him, otherwise it was an international call to his Greek-Cypriot cell phone and thus very expensive. Hearing him talk gave me a strange sense that I had heard it before, though not exactly. Cyprus was obviously not North and South Korea, nor North and South Vietnam, but its tensions were certainly more pronounced than the English-French divide in Canada. I mentioned these similarities to Jacovos.

“Do the English and French have barriers and guns?” he asked.

I almost laughed and said, “No.”

“Are they allowed to marry?”

“Yes, they are,” I said as a smile came across my face. “Isabelle and I are an example.”

“Oh, I didn’t know Isabelle was from French Canada.”

His line of questioning gave me the feeling that I should stop making analogies. Our issues in Canada seemed quite ridiculous by comparison.

The next day we went for a drive along the coast. Everything seemed so close as I followed along on a map. Island-living was about as foreign of a concept to me as anything. Canada was so enormous and spread-out it could take a week to drive from one coast to another. In Cyprus it took an hour. We stopped for lunch in the tiny town of Zygi. Katia suggested we have a meze of fish; basically an assortment of fish in varying states of deep-fry. \$120 later and lunch was over. I considered how long that much money would have lasted in South America and I shook my head at the thought.

The next day I found myself sitting on a hill in the village of Phikardou, a small hamlet about 50 minutes from Katia’s house in Nicosia. Isabelle and Katia were sitting on the hill with me, writing, reading, and relaxing. I had just finished a short meditation—my coach Kabral would be proud. The village was really just a few houses, a small museum, and a restaurant. There were a dozen or so cars parked on the side of the winding road that brought us there. Conversations hundreds of feet away were crystal clear in my ears as a gentle breeze blew from the west and the sun gently warmed my back and neck. It was spring in the mountains.

In one direction the view was spectacular: distant rolling hills with seemingly ancient rock outcroppings and a few stands of solemn trees bathed in the warm dripping sun. In the other direction were gentle fields

striped with rows of trees producing almonds, figs, and olives. Except for the occasional child's playful shout in the distance the silence was pervasive. A slight breeze flapped the pages of my book and the shadows of a half-dozen birds passed by, otherwise there was near tranquility. It was perhaps the quietest place I had experienced on the trip so far and such a dramatic change from the cacophony of Egypt. I sat in silence, taking in the energy of the breeze and the sun. The noise in my head started to quiet, the invisible hands of Egypt loosened their grip on me. The muscles of my stomach relaxed. I feared no altercation, no uncomfortable moment of interaction. I knew I would not be asked for a camel ride, not for a very long time. I took in my surroundings and felt what could only be described as pure joy. There was a slight tickle in my chest and throat as I let out an audible sigh of relief. To me it was the sound of happiness.

The next day was one spent simply walking around and enjoying Nicosia; the shops, the cafes, the warm spring air. It was most uneventful, and I couldn't have been more pleased. I spent some time at an Internet café where I used Skype to leave a message for my brother Colin and also spoke to my dad for a half hour or so. He was really happy to hear from me. He couldn't stop saying what an amazing thing it was that I was doing. He said he and my mom were following the blog closely and told their friends and anyone else who would listen to check it out too. My heart swelled as I realized how proud he was of me. It never really occurred to me how going on the trip would make *others* feel until then. My dad, not the most expressive person, was telling me that he was proud of me, in his own way. Somehow this brought me closer to him. I wondered to myself, who else was affected by my trip and how?

Our stop in Cyprus was brief but it recharged me. I relaxed in relative silence and had no set agenda for a few days, which actually connected me more to the whole experience. It was almost as though I had adopted the demeanor of an islander, recognizing that everything I needed was all right there. There was nowhere to go and no hurry.

We left Cyprus from the north side of Nicosia, and Katia was kind enough to take us to the airport. We parked at the crossover point where, apparently, people wanting to walk to the north side could do so via a narrow, dusty gravel walking path. We emptied our bags from the car and threw on our overstuffed backpacks and trudged forward, following Katia. As I walked along the path I suddenly felt as though I was in a shooting gallery. On each side were ancient buildings riddled with bullet

holes and at the base of them was coiled barbed wire and painted white plywood. I felt like a sniper could take me out at any second. The sight of a large white truck with the black letters of the UN painted on the side didn't make me feel any better. I knew, conceptually, that I was safe and everything was going to be alright. I wouldn't get shot, would I? No, everything was going to be fine. We were just tourists dragging our bags from the Cypriot south to the Turkish north in order to take a flight to Istanbul. It was all very normal. Katia confirmed that we would be fine and that people made the trek from one side to the other all the time. Why did I feel so nervous, then?

After having crossed many borders and been through all sorts of shenanigans at airport security on the trip, and through twenty years of traveling, I should have felt completely at ease, but I didn't. It was unsettling being mere meters outside of Cyprus and mere meters away from the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, in a no-man's land. Border crossing elsewhere was rather definitive: you were on one side or you were on the other; it was pretty clear cut. It was actually kind of fun because it was possible, in some places, to literally straddle two countries, as with the Canada-U.S. border and the U.S.-Mexico border. In Cyprus, however, there was a space in between that was neither here nor there. You were literally between countries, between worlds. Had I had a cell phone with me, and it rang, and whoever was calling me had asked "Where are you?" I would have honestly had to say "Nowhere" and I would have meant it.

As we approached the northern border I started to feel a bit better. My stomach relaxed and I stopped asking myself silly questions, like: If I were to die right here, right on this spot, what would the death certificate read? In the space where it indicated place of death would it read: Nowhere, or In between Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, or Not sure? Other pointless thoughts kept coming to me: Who would have jurisdiction over administering the process? Would there be debate over whose side I was on when I died? Would the police on one side drag me back to the other side so they wouldn't have to deal with it or would they dump my body in the back of the UN truck and just walk away?

As I completed my series of pointless questions it hit me that the gap between the two countries really was small—represented only by a short dusty road between them. Yet on some level they must be worlds apart, otherwise I wouldn't have had to drag myself and my bags through that death-trap just to get to the other side. Katia and Jacovos had tried

to explain earlier but I couldn't help but wonder why this gap needed to exist at all. It didn't seem like the people wanted it. They were forced into military service yet had absolutely no fear of the other side. They feared their own leadership, not their brothers on the other side of this most bizarre border. These perplexing thoughts accompanied my own realization that I was literally and figuratively in their gap—wondering if, hoping that, there may be a day when it would close. Before going there I was completely naïve about the country; I mean these countries. Now I had experienced it, spoken to people, felt their pain. Now I was invested.

"We're almost there," Katia said, braking my train of thought. "It's just up ahead."

Great, I thought to myself. I wanted to be out of the gap, it was freaking me out. To my surprise the crossing was not much more than a wooden shack. To my further surprise a bus load of school-aged children was unloading on the other side, readying to enter the Cypriot side.

Katia saw the confused look on my face.

"Lots of people do this every day," she said. They cross over to go to school, go to work, or just go for dinner."

My only thought, which I kept to myself, was why was there a gap at all?

Turkey—A beating at the bath

Istanbul

The history of Istanbul dates back to the Greek King Byzas (the namesake of Byzantium, thus *Byzantine*) in 666 B.C. For centuries it had been conquered and re-conquered, again and again. What remained was a function of those many changes, including some of the world's greatest man-made marvels.

I had read and heard that Istanbul was very European in look and feel and it struck me that way as well. It seemed strange and unsettling in some inexplicable way how Europe and Asia fused together there. The architecture was, I had decided, European, until my gaze rose up above the buildings and I saw minarets from dozens of mosques that dotted the landscape. Having just been to Egypt I guessed I was still there in some way—making me expect to be crowded by a bunch of hawkers looking to

sell me something I didn't want or need. That was obviously not the case, thankfully. We were not blending in by any means, but it felt comfortable to be a tourist.

On our first afternoon in town we walked from our hotel to the hippodrome where the Egyptian Obelisk stands and then went inside the Blue Mosque, or Sultanahmet Camii, which was built for the young Ahmet I in the early 1600's. Not surprisingly it was famous for the blue hue given off by its millions of blue tiles. Having visited some of the world's great churches and cathedrals, with all their magnificent decoration, the mosque seemed surprisingly plain to me. Having never been in one until that moment I recognized that I had had much greater expectations. The mosque contained only a giant rug (no shoes allowed) and a huge chandelier hung just above the floor, hovering perhaps ten feet up, hanging from cords at least 100 feet long. "Visitors" were stopped from entering the prayer area by what seemed a hastily made fence.

Only Muslims were allowed beyond that point. *How would anyone know what someone's belief system was just by looking at them?* Was it not possible for a white person, mistaken as a *visitor* to be a Muslim? Was it not possible for someone to be mistaken as a Muslim even though they may be a Christian, or Jew, or Hindu, or Buddhist? I wondered how that conversation went, the one where there was a misunderstanding about religious beliefs. Perhaps something like this:

"No, really, Mr. Self-appointed identifier of religious beliefs based on skin-colour and style of dress, I *am* a Muslim. I would like to enter just like all my other Muslim brothers."

"Sorry, Mr. Clearly you are not a Muslim because I have determined so, based on a cursory glance in your direction, you cannot come in."

"But . . ."

"Sorry, you can go in the *Visitor* line and shuffle through with *them*."

"But . . ."

Maybe it went something like that, or maybe there were some profanities thrown in. Regardless, it seemed ridiculous to me that I was limited in how far I could go simply because I looked like a *visitor*. I started developing a bit of an attitude about it that would stick with me for quite some time.

The exterior structure of the mosque was simply awesome, but the interior was rather dead and cold. When I visit a great church, or even a tiny one with a history, I feel the energy inside. I feel within me a sense

of connection to that energy and am in awe of it. Although I practice no religion I have great respect for places of worship. I respect religious practice, whatever it might be, and I particularly respect the place where it happens. In that mosque, however, I felt nothing. I closed my eyes and tried to connect with the energy but all I got was annoyed with the *visitors* around me talking—despite the rather obvious signs that said *No talking*.

The immense space, though attractive to the historian/architect/engineer side of me, didn't quite feel right. Perhaps it was the lights that hung so close to the floor, detracting from the immense height of the interior space. The lights seemed to crush the area, forcing the energy out. In churches I look up when I walk in, to the heavens or just to the ceiling, whichever, but I look up. Here I looked up and thought, you ruined the incredible view with these lights. The room felt oppressive and heavy. I felt that I needed to leave; it was almost as though I was pushed out.

Hagia Sofia (or Aya Sofya, amongst other spellings), is a 6th Century gem of a Basilica that was built and re-built several times before being converted into a mosque by the conquering Turks in 1453. Although some of the interior was changed by the Turks, including scratching off all of the crosses on the gallery level, it was left mostly intact and simply covered over to look like a mosque. When the modern Turkish Republic was created in 1935 it was turned into a museum, partly to end the feud over who it rightfully belonged to. Massive scaffolding rising all the way up to the limits of its 183-foot ceiling ruined much of the view inside but the space was imposing.

"This place seems to have a much stronger energy to it," I said to Isabelle.

"I know. It feels lighter somehow."

"Even though the scaffolding takes up a lot of space it feels less heavy in here. It's strange, the difference between this place and the Blue Mosque."

For years I remembered hearing the term "Whirling Dervish," as in he entered the room like a Whirling Dervish or she was running around like a Whirling Dervish. I'd always wondered what a Whirling Dervish was. I had discovered during my research on Istanbul that the ancient dance (*suma*) of the Whirling Dervish was something that you can actually pay to watch. The next thing I knew we were sitting down in a very cramped old train station storage room watching the ancient ritualistic dance. I was entranced by the mystical display and would never forget the amazing

sight of five men spinning endlessly, their fluted skirts rising up until they spun almost like tops. We sat only a few feet away from them and I was caught up in the breeze created by their spinning. Watching their faces as they spun, I suddenly felt nauseous, and needed to look away. I couldn't imagine how they could spin like that and not lose their balance, or their lunch.

A stop in Istanbul would not be complete without a visit to the Grand Bazaar—the world's largest covered bazaar—where I bought a t-shirt and Isabelle bought a gold elephant pendant for her mom. It was an amazing sight at first but it wore thin after being hassled to near death by many of the 3,000 shopkeepers. It was worse than many of the massive shopping malls in Canada and the U.S. in many ways; too big and too easy to get lost. Without the signage I was used to seeing back home I struggled to make my way through the maze. Fortunately, Isabelle and I were able to make our way out safely. Our two sets of eyes saw what only one set could not.

On the Asian side of the Bosphorous, the 30 kilometre long river that divides east and west from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara (which gives way to the Mediterranean), stands the Galata Tower. The Tower, named after the Celts, or Gauls, looks out over the New City (the Asian side), looking back to the Hagia Sofia on the other side in what is called the Old City. Interestingly, the Asian side had perhaps more European history than the European side. For centuries it was this side that housed the thousands of foreigners living in Istanbul, mostly descendants of Greeks, Armenians, Italians, and Britons. It was also home to what was once 300,000 Jews. It was this side of the river that was fun at night: alcohol, nightclubs, and general debauchery. It was known to the Ottoman Turks simply as the home of the Infidel. As with the Old City, the streets were narrow, winding, and completely confusing.

It was overcast and it started to rain at the exact moment we ascended the two flights of stairs to the top of the tower. The elevator took us to the 7th floor, four passengers at a time. We then went up a set of very steep stairs and circled the lookout area on the outside, where it was difficult for two people to stand or pass by each other. The rain pretty much ruined any chance of getting good pictures but the view was fantastic. Being able to look around at so much history all at once was empowering in some way. Just knowing that two continents came together on the river below made the passing of traffic over the bridge seem a phenomenal feat.

We took the tram back to the European side and walked back to the hotel, a new one for the night—Blue Hills Hotel—and hung out there the rest of that rainy afternoon. We went out for an inexpensive dinner, crammed into a tiny little restaurant on a major thoroughfare. I heard a collage of languages being spoken around me. A large group of young Japanese at the next table seemed to be having a great time, swilling beer and telling stories. It's funny how young everybody seemed to me. I supposed that any one of them could have been me had I gone on this adventure when I really wanted to. Now, I just felt old.

We visited the enormous Topkapi Palace, the former residence of the Ottoman Sultans, on another cool and overcast day. For centuries it was the nerve centre of the entire Ottoman Empire. It's estimated that within its walls worked between 4,000 and 7,000 people. Its multiple courtyards, gardens, and secondary buildings make it a bit of a Disneyland to navigate. The Ahmet III library was a great inspiration to us both for a potential meditation or relaxation room in our house; low pillow cushions were basically the only thing in the room. Despite the cool weather tourists were aplenty, all gawking and gasping the same way I was. We later made our way to an Internet café so I could make an entry for Istanbul and upload some pictures to our blog.

Before heading to the airport on our last day we decided to experience the world famous traditional Turkish bath. I'd never really considered myself the type of person to have a bath with a bunch of strangers but when you're on the road you do all sorts of things you wouldn't normally do. I had heard that the Turkish bath experience was a bit rough, and not particularly relaxing or enjoyable. It was not a spa, to be sure. That said I entered the building with a bit of trepidation.

A creepy feeling came over me like I was entering a brothel or something; shame on me. It wasn't quite like that, but not far off. Women and men sat in separate areas waiting for their names to be called. As I sat on a beat-up old couch I eased back to take in the view above. I was suddenly hit with an image of Thunderdome, from the movie *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*.

There were no men attached to giant rubber bands, thankfully, and no chainsaws or other nasty weapons with which to inflict pain, like in the movie, or so I thought. I sat at the base of an atrium with three floors of small rooms above me. Isabelle's name was called and she disappeared

behind a sheet that hung from the ceiling over a door frame. I was on my own and had no idea what was about to happen to me.

After waiting patiently for some time my name was finally called. I was instructed, rather robotically, to go up the tiny staircase behind me. A pointed finger implied that I should take my life in my hands and ascend the rickety planks of wood that clung for dear life to the wall. No further instructions were given. I had many questions, of course. How many levels up should I go? To whom shall I speak once I arrive up there? What should I say when I get there? What if I fall down and die a horrible death, there in Thunderdome? Fortunately a couple of other men, also tourists, were given the same abrupt instructions. We all shuffled off to the base of the staircase. I glanced back hoping against hope for further instruction or information that would make me more comfortable about climbing those stairs. There were no such instructions. I hung my head and slowly started climbing, step by step, to where I had no idea.

After a couple flights of steep steps I arrived at the top. I eagerly looked around, hoping to make eye contact with someone who would know what the hell I was supposed to do next. It felt like hours before someone glanced my way. A heavy-set gentleman with a wisp of hair remaining on his rather fat head must have sensed my desperation and turned from the enthralling card game he was playing with three other men that looked amazingly similar to him and barked something at me.

The Canadian in me responded with an immediate, "Pardon me?" Again, the barking. *What was that?* The sounds were so harsh and grating that I was in complete denial that they represented actual words, in any language, even a made-up one. All I could summon was another "Pardon me?" Finally, this rather large human being stood up, not quickly, from his chair and motioned with a thick finger to go into the room just off to my right where a door stood open. Inside were a single bed, a small night table, and a pair of slippers on the floor. Again I thought I was in a brothel. Why is this guy telling me to go in there? Why the bed? Is he coming in with me? What kind of place was this?

He again barked something, which I didn't even try to decipher. I just watched where he was motioning me, and tried unsuccessfully to forget how unbelievably uncomfortable I was. He motioned that I should take my clothes off and put on the slippers. Whoa! He came into the room and grabbed the towel that was folded on the night table. He motioned that I should put the towel on. With that he turned, left, and closed the

door. Once my heart started beating again I realized that I wasn't going to be raped or killed after all. I quickly jumped out of my clothes, into my swim trunks, and wrapped the towel around me. But, where would I store my stuff? I peeked out the door and waved at the man. I showed him my knapsack and asked, with my hands, where I should put it. He responded by pointing to the door knob, showing me that it had a lock on it and I would take a key with me. That sounded reasonable, I supposed. My knapsack had spent time in a lot worse places on the trip and everything worked out fine so I was sure this would be alright.

I followed the man down the stairs back to the main floor. I was amazed that the spindly stairs didn't succumb to his generous weight. He barked at another man, this one a beanpole nearly six and a half feet tall. Beanpole then motioned me to go through the door directly in front of me, so I did. I entered a room that reminded me very much of a horse's stall, though it didn't smell nearly as bad—nearly. I stood there unaware of what to do next, and then suddenly Beanpole grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the next room, the Hammam.

Directly in front of me was a massive round slab of stone, with a handful of other tourists wrapped in the same ugly towel I had on. A sense of relief came over me as I realized that after all this waiting and barking and being uncomfortable, I was finally there, finally ready for the Turkish bath experience. If I thought I was uncomfortable to that point, boy was I in for a surprise.

Beanpole shuffled over to the stone slab and slapped a couple of tourists on the leg in order to get them to move. Just enough space opened up on the slab for me to lie down for my "massage." I felt bad for these other guys, because they looked so relaxed until Beanpole and I arrived. Now I was trying to get comfortable in that very cramped space, on that very hard stone. I was so focused on trying to get into a comfortable position that I hadn't even noticed how hot it was in there. It was somewhere between a steam room at the gym and a sauna; hot and humid but not overwhelmingly so. My body was already starting to pour with sweat and my muscles were starting to relax. Of course, this was probably a combination of the heat and the fact that I no longer feared for my life, or worse.

Beanpole had come back with a metal bucket full of soapy water and a sponge. Was he going to wash his car? It sure looked like it. Before I knew it his strong, long-fingered hand had pinned me down by the chest on the

stone with what seemed an effortless motion. He began to “massage” my legs, grabbing the quadriceps of my right leg like he was trying to wring all the blood out of it, rhythmically cranking on it as if to send a warning to my femur that he could break it if he really wanted to. My anal sphincter immediately tightened, as did every other muscle in my body. I wanted to sit up and get him to stop but I was virtually paralyzed by the pain. Suddenly he was strangling my other quadriceps, squeezing the life out of it with rapid movements like he was kneading bread. I nearly screamed out: Someone, please, stop this mad man from tearing my flesh apart!

With the same speed that he attacked my legs, he just as abruptly stopped. Ah, thank you. I hoped I could walk afterward. With no time to catch my breath he swiftly moved to my right arm, thrashing it with the same intensity as my legs. I wasn’t sure if he considered it but my lanky arms had very little flesh relative to my legs. Surely he would dial down the intensity, no? No. I held my breath promising whatever god there was that I would do anything to have the torture stop. Again, a brief reprieve followed. Thank you! What was he doing now? Oh my god he’s massaging my stomach! Ouch! Do you need to knead? My intestines and internal organs do not need to relax, friend. *Holy shit, I’m going to die. Why do people subject themselves to this, and willingly pay for it? Was I insane, or just a tourist?*

Why Beanpole felt the need to try to push me through the stone slab is beyond me but after what seemed like days of punishment he relented. He then bent down, dipped his sponge into the soapy water in the bucket and began to viciously scrub my belly and chest. Was he trying to exfoliate my chest hair? This was simply not fun. My back cracked as he continued to push my body into the stone. This was the only time in my life I actually wished I had a bit more flesh on my bones, to take some of the pressure off. The scrubbing finally stopped by way of a slap on the belly that let me know I should turn over. Was he going to do the same to my back?

Beanpole was not much of a conversationalist, and that was fine by me. Though he was likely 110 years old, he had the svelte body of a track athlete or swimmer, and was freakishly strong. He repeated the same thrashing on the back of my legs and back as he had to my front. This time of course, by pressing so hard on my ass and lower back he drove my balls into the hard slab. I tried to arch my back so as to save my boys from the undeserved beating but he seemed to sense my tensing and pushed me back down, perhaps deriving some pleasure out of my pain. Again

he attacked me with the soapy scrubbing. Did I do something to deserve this? I'd take camel ride requests over this anytime!

Beanpole then slapped my ass, letting me know that the beating had ended. He then grunted and motioned me to yet another room. I got up off the slab, slowly and gingerly. He shoved me in the direction of the other room, making sure I had not a second of reprieve. For some reason Beanpole walked so close behind me that I felt his breath on my neck. The hammam was crowded, but not that crowded. We then entered what looked like a shower room. He then motioned me to get on my knees, on the bare floor of course, so that he could wash my hair using a small fountain that stuck out of the wall. Before I could catch my breath or get ready he jammed my face into the fountain and poured soapy water on my head. He grabbed me by the neck and wrenched my head up so I could breath and then began scrubbing my head like he was trying to wash off decades of dirt and grime.

With each breath I inhaled water, soap, and pain. My eyes stung and my ears filled with water. I thought I was going to drown. Whom could I possibly complain to about the thrashing I was taking? Was I supposed to leave a tip for Beanpole after all this? Back in the water! More scrubbing, more partial breaths, now panicked. More scrubbing, more stinging, more thoughts of an impending death. This was what infants must feel like when well-meaning parents give them baths and wash their hair. Their little eyes get water and soap in them; they struggle to breathe properly after taking in a partial lung full of water. They begin to thrash, defensively. I was an infant! As I struggled to comprehend the nature and circumstance of my death the scrubbing and beating suddenly stopped. A towel then began to rip my hair out in bunches. It must be almost over! Beanpole then slapped my back and motioned me to stand up.

He pushed me into yet another room where a kindly little man was handing out towels. The little man muttered in mostly understandable English "Dry here, wrap towel, get changed."

It was over! It was one exhausting and painful bath and I could not have been happier to get the hell out of there. A Turkish bath was a once in a lifetime experience and from what I could tell it was a once in a lifetime experience *for a reason*.

Middle East again

Israel—Why are you going to Israel?

Tel Aviv

As I approached the ticket counter in the Istanbul airport I somehow knew it was going to be a different check-in experience than I had had before. At most airports in the world there is one main area that would be called “immigration,” the place where some unfriendly passport agent suspiciously compares the picture in your passport to the current version of you and wrinkles their forehead trying to confirm that you are indeed you. They probe with a couple of ridiculous and meaningless questions that make you sweat, even though you have nothing to worry about. After a minute or two of feeling publicly violated you take back your passport and humbly shuffle off to your gate, staring at the floor the whole way

Similarly, there is typically one place that would be called “security,” the place where you get electronic gadgets stuck in your face by super friendly and compassionate folks looking to see if you are trying to bring any suspicious materials onto your flight, like toothpaste or hairspray. Interestingly, these materials are perfectly fine, as long as they are in containers no larger than 100ml, because if they are 101ml or more you could find yourself on a no-fly list.

These two areas of most airports are probably the least favourite areas for most air travelers. There’s nothing to look forward to, and you are treated like cattle, at best. Well, somehow I knew getting into Israel was going to be a bit more complex, and I was going to be rather pissed off after it was over, yet simultaneously happy to have survived it.

As I stood in line to check in an attractive airline employee came over to me and asked, "Where are you flying today?"

"I'm going to Tel Aviv, along with my wife, who is right behind me."

"May I see your passport please?" she inquired.

"Sure, here it is," I said as I handed it over to her. *Why do you need to see my passport, you're an airline employee? What are you going to do with it? This isn't going to be another Egypt, is it?*

"And your ticket, please."

"Here you go." She looked at the ticket and my passport as though they were almost indecipherable, wrinkling and contorting her face, almost in a grimace.

"Why are you going to Israel?"

Are you kidding me? Why am I going to Israel? I'm a tourist you idiot, why would you ask me this question, and, by the way, are you an airline employee or immigration, or what? I suppressed the rage that was beginning to brew in my belly and somehow controlled my desire to curl up my fingers and launch a right cross at her smug little face. "I'm a tourist, I'm going to see the sights," I muttered.

"Do you know anyone in Israel?"

What! What do you care? Who are you anyway? I quickly considered my options: tell her to piss off, be honest, or lie. I decide to be honest. "Yes, I have a friend in Ashkelon."

Her eyebrows bolted straight up so fast I thought they might fly right off her face altogether. "Will you be going to Ashkelon?"

You must be more than an airline employee to be asking me all these questions, so I am going to answer all your questions honestly and with a smiling face, even though I badly want to punch you in yours. "No, we are going to meet my friend in Tel Aviv while we are there. We are also going to Jerusalem to see the Old City."

Her scowling face suddenly changed to a bright smile and she surprised me by saying "Enjoy your trip."

It was clear that she had a script to follow with a number of offshoots of questions depending on my responses, and once her script was complete she could let loose her iron grip on my progress and finally let me pass, with a warm, welcoming smile no less. I was put off by the process and the way in which I was probed. I should have known better of course. Had I not been probed for a few months already I'm sure it wouldn't have been such a big deal.

Tel Aviv, the younger sister to Jaffa in the official municipality of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, was bustling at 3:45 AM when we arrived. The streets were strewn with teenagers and young twentysomethings, stumbling about after a night out drinking and partying. I had read that the city was very young, both in its infrastructure and development, but also in terms of the average inhabitant. During the taxi ride from the airport to the hotel I was starting to see that this really was the case.

What struck me most about Tel Aviv—and I know it's not a feature of the city, but one of the country—was the presence of the army in the form of the conscripted teenagers walking around with machine guns casually slung over their shoulders. Many of the girls were regularly chatting on cell phones, carrying hand bags, wearing make-up and low-slung pants, and had untied boots. Many of the boys had long, messy hair, beards, and baggy, ill-fitting pants. All this *and* automatic weapons. I guess I had just never considered these things before but I was feeling a bit queasy walking the streets with these teenagers and their guns, knowing they were not really paying much attention to the weapons but were more interested in chatting with each other and texting.

The city is easy to walk around in, and that we did. We covered significant ground, including strolling through the mostly covered Carmel Market, shopping along the popular Sheinkin Street, and taking in the amazing walk along the sea. The beachfront was awash in flour-like soft sand and there was absolutely no trash. The seaside promenade that stretches essentially the main part of the city was busy with pedestrians, cyclists, and hundreds of crazies driving super-powered mopeds.

We walked north to the old port area, which had been renovated to include a huge boardwalk, shops, and restaurants. The beach was packed with sun seekers and people actually *swam* in the water. This was novel for me coming from Toronto, where Lake Ontario was often the last place you would consider putting your bare skin. The water was monitored constantly and reported in an index that told you how far away from the water you really needed to be on a given day to avoid a slow and very painful death.

Being a Saturday there were thousands of people out enjoying the unseasonably hot weather. It was over 30°C, significantly above the average temperature for that time of year. The promenade was packed with teenagers on scooters—some as big as regular street motorbikes—and families and people simply enjoying being outside. The whole scene

surprised me somehow. I almost couldn't believe I was there and I almost couldn't believe where *there* was; a place so beautiful and alive, seemingly carefree, yet mere miles from millions of people who did not like the way of life of the very people I was walking with on that promenade. At that moment a navy helicopter appeared out of nowhere and ripped past just off shore, not fifty feet above the water. It served as a further reminder that the reality of the situation was much more dire than the frolicking in the sand and the casual stroll along the beach would suggest.

In the late afternoon we had lunch at a hole in the wall restaurant that served hummus as the main dish. We came upon the two young ladies running the place as they chatted animatedly in Hebrew. Once they heard us speaking English they quickly switched over into English too. Given they were both American, from California, it seemed natural of course. This was my first introduction to the notion of the American in Israel and from that point on I saw and or heard literally hundreds of Americans. After lunch we went to see a movie called *Conversations with God*. Isabelle had heard about the movie some time before and we had had a hard time getting the one DVD copy from our Blockbuster in Toronto so we both felt rather lucky to see it there in a Tel Aviv theater, about two years after it was in theaters in Canada.

The next day we went to the old port and met up with Einav, a friend I had originally met back in Toronto nearly two years before. She was the friend from Ashkelon that I had referred to when speaking with the not-so-friendly airline employee at the airport in Istanbul. Einav had come to Toronto to attend a seminar that I was also attending and we became fast friends.

As I often did with people I have met at various events over the years, I stayed in touch with her periodically. When I let her know we would be coming to Israel she was excited to get together and catch up. Einav and Isabelle hit it off right away and I felt that the whole reason I was there in Tel Aviv was to put those two together. Meeting with Einav put Isabelle in touch with her own creative energy and she was thrilled to meet with her. It was a surreal moment for Einav and I and we both enjoyed our brief chat. Einav and Isabelle, both professional life coaches, had all sorts of ideas about coaching and developing their businesses. It was nice to see Isabelle excited and in high spirits.

The Tel Aviv Museum of Art—a walk of about an hour each way from our hotel—was somewhat of a let-down. It had some of the staples: Renoir,

Van Gogh, and Picasso but the curators made some other very curious choices as well. The contemporary works included a statue of a man bent completely over and shitting into his own mouth (apparently chocolate was used when the contraption was turned on) and a woman—at least I think it was a woman—hanging upside down from the high ceiling and dripping blood from a gaping chest wound into a large bucket on the floor. These somewhat odd choices reflected my experience at the museum, a place I would not likely recommend to anyone.

When I saw yet another gaggle of teenaged army personnel chatting on a bench I considered what it must be like to actually live in Israel. People had to live with the constant threat of bombs and rockets and yet appeared happy and seemed rather nonchalant about their plight; a reminder to me to live life rather than worry about circumstance. They didn't seem to live in fear of what *might* happen but simply enjoyed life to the fullest. Their example provided me a great reminder to do just that. Although my trip represented that notion to the best of my understanding there had been times when I had not been living each day that way. It was not easy to do with so much going on and without the comforts of home that I was used to.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is less than an hour away from Tel Aviv by car, emphasizing just how small Israel is, particularly to a Canadian like me that can easily spend several hours just trying to navigate my way across Toronto on a given day. The city is scattered amongst hills that make driving a real challenge. Having been built and re-built numerous times the road infrastructure was something of a mess. It was easy to get lost not only because of the twisting roads and steep hills but also because nearly every house looked the same. In fact it was mandated that all homes be made of stone, thus they are. It wasn't until I saw the Old City that I actually knew where I was; otherwise I was rather lost in the maze.

From Mount Scopus I could see the Old City in the distance, the Dome of the Rock glowing like a golden light bulb on the Temple Mount. The city walls, last rebuilt in 1542, encompassed a ridiculous number of people in an incredibly small space, but somehow it all worked. We entered the Old City at the Dung Gate, so named because the city dwellers

of centuries ago used the entrance/exit as the place to dump their garbage out.

Within a few moments of passing through the gate we were faced with the security entrance to the Western, or Wailing, Wall, the most holy site in Judaism. It was all that remained of the Second Temple, destroyed by Titus—one of those nasty Romans—in 70 A.D. The wall was actually very long and deep but those that came to pray or wish were ushered into a relatively small area, perhaps the length of a football field. The women's section was maybe one-third the size of the men's. Among the worshipers were those stuffing notes into the wall, hoping that what they asked for would come true.

As I stood in amazement not really sure what to do next I was approached by a razor-thin man dressed shabbily in tattered clothing. His bright eyes and wide grin seemed to defy his physical state.

"Do you speak English?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," I replied.

"Are you from America?"

"No, I'm from Canada."

"Oh. Canada is a nice place."

"Have you been to Canada?"

"No, I've heard it is nice though. Can I say a prayer for you and your family?"

"Uh, okay, I suppose," I stumbled, not really sure what to say.

It occurred to me that there was some sort of hustle going on but I reasoned that it wasn't so because of where I was. There's no way they would let hawkers and beggars in *here*, would they? I was, after all, standing mere feet away from one of the most holy sites in the world. I could see this happening outside of the Old City, or on the other side of the metal detectors, but not *right beside the wall*.

The man then gave me a small length of red string—for good luck—and tied it around my wrist. He said a prayer and promptly asked for a donation. Not a half-second later, before I could even reply to the man, another guy came up to me and asked for money because, apparently, seven (not two or three or some other more reasonable number) of his brothers and sisters had been killed by bombs and rockets. I quickly flipped the first man a couple of Shekels and turned away, walking toward the wall.

I watched others as they approached the wall, being careful not to stare but looking for examples of what people were doing. Some people

kept their distance, praying and rocking their heads and upper bodies back and forth, as if having a conversation with the wall. Others pressed right up against it, as if whispering in its ear. I felt compelled to get close. I slowly, tentatively, leaned up against it, not asking for anything but just enjoying the energy, listening. As if pulled in by some invisible tractor beam my whole body nestled right up, rather oblivious to anything or anyone else around me.

My four powerful words—words I affirmed to myself most days—came to me for the first time in what seemed like a very long time: health, happiness, success, and wealth. The words simply manifested in my mind, coming to me again and again. As I leaned close my face started to feel warm. It was as if the literally millions of prayers of the past were trapped just under the surface of the stones and their constant movement, the cacophony of their running into each other, warmed the surface. I don't know how much time had passed before my face started to feel hot. With surprising effort I pulled my face away from the wall, breaking free from the energy source that had sucked me in. I stood, stunned, almost unbelieving of what had just happened to me. I suddenly became very self-conscious, quickly looking around to see if anyone was looking at me. Not a single pair of eyes was set on me. Everyone in sight was having some form of the same experience I had just had and it all seemed right.

Adjacent to the Wall (everything in the Old City is adjacent to everything else because it's so small) is the entrance to the Muslim Quarter. One step through the tunnel and I could tell I was in a different world. The music and smells were almost overpowering. The Via Dolorosa, the street on which Christ walked to his death (there is still some debate over where exactly he walked as he made his way through the Muslim Quarter) was highlighted by "stations" that identified certain events along the way. These included where he stopped to rest against a wall, where he wiped the sweat from his brow, and where he fell to the ground. Shops lining the street offered more trinkets than were needed for the journey. As we were there only days after Easter I couldn't help but think about how crowded it must have been a few days prior, as the road is really nothing more than a narrow alley, barely wide enough for two people to pass each other.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, also known as the Church of the Resurrection, where Christ was crucified, buried, and resurrected, lies in the Christian Quarter. This, too, was packed with pilgrims and tourists but as soon as I entered it the sense of awe began to set in. The

spot where Christ's body was washed was surrounded by believers, tears flowing down their faces as they wailed and prayed. Whether you count yourself a believer or not the entire church had an amazing energy about it and literally hummed with chatter and prayers.

The City of David, immediately below the Old City, is home to the tomb of King David, amongst other things, according to our guide, doing his best to speak loudly and clearly in Hebrew first, and then English. What a job this guy had, I thought. He got to explain these details to gawking tourists every day, in at least two languages. Before I knew it we were back on the bus and as I looked out the window the Old City slowly disappeared as we drove away.

On the grounds of the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum were a number of trees that had been planted in the names of those that had helped the Jews during the Second World War, including Oskar Schindler. One section of the museum was dedicated to the over two million children that died during the Holocaust; a truly somber place. The main museum contained an incredible amount of information, delivered via various media, that told the story of the Holocaust. Maps showed where Hitler's Third Reich dominated country after country and how Jews were deported, put into slums, and marked for death. It was so hard to believe that something like this could have happened under the watchful eyes of the world's powers. What was also rather amazing is the amount of information that has been compiled and how so many artifacts and photos had been salvaged. The Hall of Names, which comprised rows upon rows of books containing the names of the six million who perished, encapsulated the entire experience for me: head-shaking disbelief.

We ran into an elderly couple at Café Hillel one day that was trying to find their hotel. They were American and we had a map. I went up the street to confirm which direction they should be going in order to find their hotel while Isabelle stayed back to talk to them. She found that they were there as volunteers. Isabelle and I were always interested in various volunteer opportunities so she asked them who they were volunteering for. The organization was called Volunteers for Israel. The couple was there for a few weeks to work with the Israeli Army, painting and cleaning *bombs*. Had I not heard of such a thing previously I'm sure I would have been taken aback. I was still rather put off by the whole thing. Eventually the couple went on their way and I pondered what they were doing there. It seemed inconceivable that an elderly couple, easily in their seventies,

would think it was a good idea to help prepare weapons meant to kill other people. How could that be? People there lived with the possibility of death at every corner, on every bus, in every flower shop. Strangely, they also recruited volunteers to clean their bombs. I then remembered what Einav had told me: "It's just part of our life here, the way it is."

As we strolled around one night Isabelle and I found a small coffee shop that looked comfortable and quaint inside so we stopped in. An enormous security guard stood at the door. He was seven feet tall if he was an inch. He asked to see inside the small backpacks we were carrying. I handed them over, feeling like I was at airport suddenly. He nodded to us and we turned to go in. Once inside I felt like I was at a Starbucks or Second Cup back home: cushy chairs in the corner, plenty of students tapping on their laptops, and the rich aroma of coffee beans hanging in the air. We found a small two-person table near the back and sat down. From where I sat I could see the front door and the side street.

"Not many coffee shops back home would have a security guard," I jokingly said to Isabelle.

"That's for sure," she replied, smiling.

"The crowd in here doesn't look like a bunch of troublemakers, does it?"

"There's a table of army kids right there."

"Well, I feel pretty safe, then."

After a few minutes of sipping my café mocha and chatting with Isabelle I noticed a man come in the door with a black backpack slung over his shoulder. He looked very familiar to me, like a friend back home. He was of medium height though seemed powerfully built under the light jacket he wore. There was nothing notable about him or his demeanor yet I found myself watching him intently. He sat down at the table in front of ours, joining a friend of his who had been sitting there by himself since we got there. He flipped off his backpack onto the small table and began to open it. It was an unusual bag. It was compartmentalized and seemed almost futuristic in its design; very James Bond-like. Suddenly it hit me: it wasn't a regular backpack. It wasn't even a computer bag. It was a specially made bag.

I watched closely as he opened it, splaying it apart like a book. He then unhooked a Velcro strap to reveal a massive, metallic-coloured handgun. The light in the coffee shop just above his table glinted off the gun, shining in my eyes as I tried to readjust my position so that I could

confirm what I thought I saw. It was indeed a handgun, almost as big as a sawed-off shotgun. The words formed on my lips but I kept them to myself: holy fuck! Isabelle, whose back was to him, looked at me intensely, probably wondering why my eyes had popped out of my head. I froze. I didn't know what to do or say. The man pulled the gun out and put it on the table with a thud. I glanced to my left where the army kids were sitting, their rifles slung over the backs of their chairs. My heart began to race, as did my mind. What was going on?

In a flash my mind went to all conceivable scenarios, most worthy of a movie script. I considered where I was: a coffee shop in Jerusalem. How many stories had I read about coffee shops in Jerusalem being blown apart? Too many. I immediately knew it was time for us to leave. I didn't want to stick around to see how things ended. Isabelle, still oblivious to what was going on, sat with a lost sort of look on her face; probably expecting me to say something, which I hadn't for several seconds.

I leaned in on the table with my elbows, getting closer to Isabelle, encouraging her with my eyes to do the same. She uncrossed her legs, put her coffee down, and leaned in. There was no simple way to say what I wanted to say so I just said it.

"Sweetie, there is a man at the table behind you with a handgun. Don't turn around, just stand up and walk toward the door. We're leaving right now."

"What?"

"Sweetie, we're leaving. Let's go."

Before she had a chance to reply I stood up, stepping to her side of the table and put my arm around her shoulder and guided her up and around the man's table. I glanced to the side to see if the gun was still on the table, which it was. We quickly walked to the door and scurried out to the sidewalk. We walked for at least a minute before I looked back or even tried to talk to Isabelle. My heart rate slowed, as did my pace. Isabelle slowed too. We looked at each other with wide eyes.

"So much for having security at the front door," I said, still in disbelief. "How can someone bring a cannon like that into a coffee shop?"

Not even listening to Isabelle's response I went on a rampage in my mind, asking the questions that had no answers. Like Einav said: "It's just part of our life here, the way it is."

Dead Sea and Masada

Sitting atop a cliff 470 metres above the Dead Sea—and therefore only slightly above sea level—is the famed city of Masada. Built by King Herod over 2,000 years ago the area covered by the plateau is an amazing 23 acres. Considered essentially impregnable given its mountain top location Masada was also in the middle of nowhere, far from any food or water source. Herod built Masada with that in mind and thus there are 15 giant cisterns for water and numerous storerooms for food. The Palace had a semi-circular terrace that provided amazing views of the Dead Sea, Ein Gedi, and the Judean Mountains. Immediately across the other side of the Dead Sea lay Jordan today.

Masada, like much of the Holy Land, was under Roman control in the first century A.D. As the persecution continued many Jews sought refuge at Masada in 66 A.D. When Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D. more Jewish zealots fled to Masada. The Romans, looking to wipe out the Jewish resistance sent forces to Masada in 72 A.D. to take care of business. It was believed that they built an enormous ramp to reach the top of the cliff in order to break through the city wall. Inside, the resistance members decided that they would rather die than be captured or killed by the Romans. As the story goes ten men were selected to kill the 900 or so people there and, once complete, kill themselves. How do we know this story? A handful of women and children hid out from this mass suicide and told their story to the conquering Romans the next day.

Masada fell into darkness until being rediscovered in 1838. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and very busy tourist draw. The views from Masada out to the mountains and below to the Dead Sea are breathtaking. The Dead Sea, sitting 417 metres below sea level is the lowest point on earth. Any water in the immediate area drains here and then evaporates in the very hot desert temperature, leaving behind a sea consisting of approximately 35% salt.

I felt it impossible to resist, the idea of floating in the Dead Sea somehow captured my imagination many years prior and I absolutely had to do it. I knew it was a bit touristy, and everyone did it, but it was just too compelling. I changed into my shorts, bore my pasty-white skin to the sun (and other surely shocked tourists) and tiptoed in. It didn't feel that different, I thought. The water started to feel somehow lighter as I got in past my knees. I crouched down and dipped my legs and butt into the

water. Before I knew it I had completely sat down and clumsily tumbled backward, reaching back with both hands to support myself. The water seemed to push back against my weight and completely kicked my feet out from under me. My body bobbed up and down in the water a couple of times and my instinct to straighten out my back and legs helped me to shoot to the surface. Before I knew it I was laying back in the water as though I was in a lounge chair, minus the big, comfortable cushions of course. I let out a girly giggle and tested my weight in the water over and over, as though somehow something might be different each time. Isabelle laughed at my giggles, and at the undoubtedly strange look on my face.

Jordan—Kaleidoscope of colour

Getting into Jordan was relatively painless—and free—crossing from Eilat. We got a taxi to Petra with a guy named Osama. He first took us from the border to his house (or at least I thought it was his house) in Aqaba in his nice, comfortable luxury car. He then transferred us into his old, beat-up Saturn, which of course had no air conditioning. I had seen lots of trickery over the previous couple of months but that little ruse was a classic: the old “bait and switch.” I was too tired to put up a fight, and I recognized that it was entirely too late to even attempt to do anything about it. In the end Osama was actually a pretty nice guy and didn’t try to hassle us or anything. During the entire trip I was waiting for him to tell us we had to stop somewhere, a place we would, of course, be offered trinkets and other junk at inflated tourist prices. I was rather shocked when we stopped for fuel and he actually bought us chips and drinks. I knew right then that Jordan was not Egypt.

Petra

Petra is perhaps unfortunately famous due its being the set of scenes from the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. It was unfortunate because an average movie should never be what defines such an incredible place of natural and man-made beauty. Petra’s history goes back over 2,200 years when the Nabateans, an ancient Arabic tribe, settled there from the Arabian Peninsula. That area of southern Jordan became important over the years as a trade route between China and India and the Mediterranean.

The Nabateans survived by levying tolls on the trade route and providing safe passage to the caravans. It was in 106 AD that the Roman Empire annexed the Nabatean Kingdom, as they often had occasion to do back then. Eventually the trade routes began to change and Petra fell to ruins by the 14th century. It was “rediscovered” again in 1812.

Our hotel, the Petra Guest House, had recently been taken over by the Crowne Plaza next door and therefore was well-run and much nicer than we expected. The room was huge, everything was clean, and the pool was a real treat, given some of the places we had stayed on the trip so far. The travel magazines marketed a benefit of the Petra Guest House as being only a hundred meters from Petra’s gate. Well, they lied: it was only fifty metres.

The *Siq* is the long, narrow, 1,200-metre path that ended at the Treasury, the building made famous by the aforementioned average movie. I was immensely distracted as we walked all along the narrow rock alley as the walls shone with incredible hues of orange, pink, and purple under the mid-day sun. It was just as I had seen in all those documentaries, only more beautiful, more colourful, and more powerful.

The Monastery, a similarly designed building as the Treasury, only grander, was much less busy. It sat at the top of an 800-step climb through the mountains and took my breath as I rounded the corner. Not far from the Monastery are lookout points that offer a vast and seemingly endless view of the valley below. The blowing wind was so clean and fresh it filled my lungs all the way to my toes.

I found a flat promontory jutting out over the cliff and sat down on the warm stone. I closed my eyes and felt the sun on my face. The blustering wind was the only sound. I felt as if I was floating, hovering over the valley below. The wind carried me on its current and I faded into a warm semi-consciousness. My breathing was deep, the air moving into and out of my lungs in slow-motion. I slipped into meditation and shut off all aspects of my awareness other than the sensation of the air flowing past my nostrils and into my lungs, my diaphragm rising up, and the muscles of my lower stomach seizing in that split-second where air is neither coming in nor going out. My diaphragm dropped and the air pushed through my core and past my nostrils, warm and moist, on its way out.

I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder, the familiar touch of Isabelle’s hand. I realized, rather slowly, that I was awake again. My body was

suddenly aware of where I was, and I was no longer floating, no longer in deep meditation.

“How long have I been here?” I asked.

“About 20 minutes or so, I think.”

For me it was but a flash, a mere split second.

Moments later I saw a couple huddled down on the rocks, apparently taking a picture of something very, very small. My curiosity kicked in as I started to wonder what they could possibly be taking a picture of. As I approached I saw the woman positioning herself to be in a picture, the man only a few feet away, lying on his stomach with the camera horizontal to the ground. Suddenly I saw it. It was a two-inch high space action figure; rather well suited given the rocky moonscape vista, I concluded. Okay, I thought, we weren't the only ones traveling with a special friend that got to be in all the fun and interesting pictures. I proposed a group picture with Zen Monkey—the small stuffed animal my niece had given us for Christmas, hoping we would take it on the trip—but was met with a cold response. Imagine that, they shunned my monkey!

The Urn Tomb was the largest of the royal tombs cut into the face of the mountain that overlooks what was once the main avenue of Petra, the Colonnaded Street. As impressive as the other tombs were: the Silk, Palace, and Corinthian, the interior of the Urn Tomb was something to behold in the late-day sunlight as it seemed to stretch out the stone into a palate of reds, pinks, oranges, blues, and dramatic blacks.

The Theater, a Nabatean construction clearly influenced by the ruling Romans, is of a classic design and cut almost entirely into the stone face of the mountain. With seating for 7,000 people it must have been quite the place to take in the theatrical productions of the day, or perhaps the occasional Christian sacrifice.

I found myself thinking how generally impressed I was with how friendly Jordanians were. I didn't feel like I was being screwed at every turn like in Egypt. People were gracious and the double-talk was limited. One guy even gave me change from 1 JD when I bought only six postcards instead of ten. I only wanted six so I ultimately only paid for six. This would definitely not have happen in Egypt. In Egypt I would have paid for more than ten and would have surrendered my passport for at least a day in order to get the six postcards I actually wanted. We even got a free dinner at the Toledo Hotel in Amman because they could not give us the double room they were supposed to provide us.

In Jordan I actually felt like it was okay for me to be there, like I didn't need to pay someone off because I was walking on sacred ground, or intruding, or taking advantage of them in some way. I felt welcome; an odd feeling, but I liked it.

I couldn't help but wonder about the next leg of the trip, one that I was greatly looking forward to, but also very reticent about given how mentally and physically tough it might be. I had heard many horror stories about it and I was about to live it for myself: India.

India—Meditation and frustration

Southern India—Pune, Goa, Kerala

Pune and OSHO

I sat on a small chair in our simple, yet expensive, room at the OSHO International Meditation Resort and pondered how far I had come, physically and spiritually, to be there. It was tiring just thinking about it. Thankfully I was in the right place to reinvigorate myself.

OSHO, also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, was an Indian guru and spiritual teacher in the 1970s and 1980s. He established the ashram, really more of a commune, in 1974. It attracted meditators and others on the path of self-discovery from all over the globe. OSHO passed away in 1990 but that didn't stop people from coming, including us.

Everyone at the resort was required to wear a maroon-coloured robe, or some form of it, at all times during the day. Money was of no use there. You had to purchase cards (not the electronic form we so enjoy) worth a certain amount of Rupees and as you bought things the amount would be reduced. If you sneezed or coughed during a mediation session it was expected that you would leave immediately so as not to spread your germs amongst everyone. You had to watch a video about how to properly obtain food in the cafeteria without leaving behind even more of your nasty germs. It was all a bit strange getting used to the strict rules and communal way of life but I had to let go of my ego and connection to my Western ways and sink into a new way of being. It was my new normal, for a week anyway.

With the noise and cacophony of the bustling city outside I was able to relax and centre myself. I had been looking forward to my stay there as it would give me a reprieve from the constant and sometimes uncomfortable travel. It was meant to be a place to rest and recover my strength for the remainder of the journey. I was enjoying the slow pace, the beautiful setting, and the many opportunities I'd have to meditate and connect with others.

During my *vipassana* and *silent sitting* meditations I found my mind drifting constantly; thinking about things and people from various times and places in my life. Deep inside I sensed I had much to work through and to release. What better place to do that than in a maroon robe in a communal resort half way around the world?

The *nadabrahma* meditation involved humming for the first half-hour. They said that after a while the vibration created by the humming would take over your body. On a few occasions I actually did feel my body vibrating even though I had stopped humming. Afterward my body felt as though it had received a gentle electrical shock: extremely relaxed and light, yet warmly vibrating.

After the vibrating stopped I went with Isabelle to the Zorba the Buddha restaurant where I had a cappuccino and two small chocolate chip cookies. It was my birthday, after all, so I got to what I wanted. Why do we think we can do whatever we want only on our birthday? Why can't we live every day like it's our birthday?

In the resort's welcome session that morning Lara, an energetic young woman from Brazil, talked about how in the Western world we clearly differentiate between work and the rest of life; we spend our five working days looking forward to our weekends and we spend working months looking forward to our holidays. There was a sense of separation. She introduced something called "Work as Meditation." I interpreted that to mean that we didn't have to separate the two, as I did. The prior few days' experience had put my mind in a place where it could accept the idea of meditation as work, or work as meditation. It was all the same—it just depended on how you looked at it.

After another vipassana meditation I noticed that the more meditation sessions I did the more thinking I did—which was quite the opposite of what I expected. The meditation leaders talked a lot about awareness and how sometimes when we meditate we think a lot, which is perfectly fine, and we see things with our mind's eye. They advised us to be aware of

these things and simply accept them and then let them go. This proved to be excellent advice as I continued to deal with the experiences and emotions of the trip. Clearly, I needed to be more aware and I needed to let things go.

Evening meditation at the resort was somewhat different than the sessions available throughout the day. The evening meditation meeting was held at the OSHO Auditorium, an enormous, black pyramid-shaped building that covered over 250,000 square feet and whose apex was about a hundred feet high. When I first saw it I had a brief Egypt flashback and immediately looked around for hawkers or someone who may offer me a camel ride. Thankfully, there were none. To reach the entrance we had to cross a long bridge, like a causeway, that stretched out over a large reflecting pool. The evening session required that all meditators wear a white robe rather than the maroon version. The session was much longer than the others and included listening to, and sometimes watching, old recordings of OSHO himself. These were what I had playfully termed with Isabelle his *talking to us from beyond the grave* sessions.

These evening meetings allowed me to get in touch with aspects of my trip that I had not previously accessed. When I thought about the amazing journey I was on I couldn't help but think how I wanted others to experience their dreams too, however they may come and in whatever form they may take. I wanted people who were thinking about it to stop thinking and start doing. More people taking action on their dreams would send more positive energy into the universe. I knew that being around people who lived their dreams rubbed off on me and I hoped that I could do the same for others.

On the logistics front we were having some issues with the agency that put together our itinerary for India after we would leave OSHO. They waited until the last minute to book flights and also neglected to tell us that we couldn't use a credit card for the deposit. The major event that day was finding the ICICI Bank, withdrawing 40,000 Rupees, and depositing it into the tour company's account. We hadn't had to do much planning, mostly just make a few decisions regarding the itinerary they proposed, and that was the way I wanted it.

Our time at OSHO was the longest we had spent in any one place and it was nice not having to try to constantly find hotels and places to eat. It was definitely starting to feel like I was on the down slope of the trip. At that point I felt okay with it. I wondered before we left if I would

feel sad or disappointed as the trip wound down but at that moment I felt fine. We still had lots of time left. It had been nice to slow down and sit still for a while.

I had been going to two or three meditations per day plus the evening meeting since we arrived there and I felt good about that. I had not felt compelled to do more than that. My quiet, alone time was important and I didn't want to feel like I needed to go to meditations all day long. Isabelle had been going to four or five meditations per day and she was really enjoying it. Maybe someday when I had more meditation experience I would do the same. She had been talking to me about coming with her to San Diego that fall to do a week of meditation with Deepak Chopra. Perhaps that would be my chance.

A thought popped into my head as our time at OSHO wound down: how would I account for the eight days we spent there on our travel blog? I didn't want to concern anyone, especially people at work, who might think I had gone off to join some crazy cult half way around the world. My friends and family were generally understanding people but trying to explain why I wore a maroon robe all day, and then a white robe each evening, would be no easy task. Maybe I would skip over the part about the robes.

I spotted an article in the Times of India whose headline read: Happiness is Temporary, Bliss is Eternal. It said, "Happiness is bliss outwardly directed to the senses and their world of relativity and change." It used a cottage by the sea as a typical example of what people identify with as secure, and something that would make them happy. Unfortunately, it can't last; therefore it will become boring, or even a burden. "To a mind full of attachments, bliss seems almost a threat. The concept of absolute consciousness is overwhelming." That was heavy. I pondered it for some time. Attachments—who didn't have them? I knew I had them. I was attached to many things, not the least of which, despite wishing the opposite, was the feeling that I should have done the trip many years before. What I was coming to terms with was the idea that things worked out the way they did for a reason and I was meant to do it exactly when I did it.

Day 101 was our last at OSHO. We arrived mere seconds late for Silent Sitting that morning (there was zero tolerance for lateness at any scheduled session at OSHO and thus we were not allowed to enter) and as a result we ended up meeting Anant Shanti (who was also late),

a girl from Poland who had taken sanyas (to become a sanyasi one must renounce desire; in effect they perform desire-less actions while remaining unattached to what may result) and taken a new name (at least spiritually). I was certain that our morning worked out the way it was supposed to work out and we added yet another interesting person in our international network of contacts. Meeting Anant not long after reading the article about attachment could not have been an accident.

Our travel agent friends continued to cause me angst. I deposited 40,000 Rupees in their account but an e-mail arrived that said the price of the package was indeed \$500 U.S. more. I saw this *nibble* coming for a few days but that didn't stop me from being frustrated about it when it happened. I wanted to prove to Joshi that the price of flights in India didn't increase that much from one day to the next as he contended. I felt preyed upon and got very defensive. Isabelle took the high road and was not worried about the obvious lying *nibble*. She simply said to him, "If you provide someone a quote, you stick to it. It's that simple. You don't change it at the last minute."

Part of me agreed with her approach and what she said but another part of me said that we needed to play by Indian rules, where promises are not necessarily promises the way we normally viewed them. Indian rules were most definitely not Canadian rules. Regardless, I was a bit nervous about all this happening the night before we were supposed to start our itinerary with them. I didn't like the idea of having to take charge of the next 24 days and plan hotels and transportation at the last minute. I was sick of the Internet, as helpful as it was. It chewed up so much time and energy to make arrangements like that. I hoped Joshi wasn't going to screw us and leave us stranded.

My body was tense as I thought about going back out into the world again after a week of secluded, hassle-free relaxation and quiet. Being inside the walls of OSHO was like having a nice comfortable blanket cast over me; I felt protected from the harsh realities of the outside world. It had taken days to shed the tension and frustration that had built up over the previous three months of travel and the thought of going back into the insanity of the world was not at all appealing. Before leaving I dove into meditation sessions for the last time to help me get ready.

Meditation, I had learned, was much more than just sitting still and trying not to fall asleep. In fact, falling asleep was a perfectly normal thing to happen to rookies like me. The body knows what it wants, and

sometimes it wants sleep. If my mind wandered, that was alright too. I had learned that what was more important was what happened *after* meditation, not what happened *during* meditation.

Calangute, Goa

Goa is a tiny little enclave of beaches and small towns popularized to the West by those adventuring hippies in the 1960s. It was a Portuguese colony for centuries and the remnants of their influence were still present, most notably in the crucifixes and pictures of Jesus everywhere. I found this a bit odd at first given that 900 million people in India are Hindus. Goa was effectively kept alive by tourism so it was a high-pressure sales pitch at every turn, mostly for taxi rides, cheap t-shirts, and other trinkets.

I knew something wasn't quite right when we arrived at the Paradise Village Beach Resort, in Calangute, Goa. Of the four words in its name the only one that even remotely described the place was *beach*, and even that took several minutes to walk to. Paradise was not at all an appropriate word and resort was a stretch. The beach actually was quite nice but perhaps a bit too hyped by the travel guidebooks.

This was the first stop on the 24-day itinerary put together by the tour company. We were supposed to go sightseeing the day we arrived but somehow Joshi messed that up so we ended up sitting around the 1960s era pool pondering what we had gotten ourselves into.

There wasn't much to see in town except shop after shop offering all sorts of cheap trinkets. I immediately thought of Mexico and the tourist trap stores that offer up the local *history* by way of cheap statues of gods, goddesses and the like.

Only one shop stood out—a book store. I was drawn to it immediately as I was in need of something to read as we continued our journey. The shop was really just a handful of very high bookshelves crammed together in very tight quarters. As I scanned the room I spotted the owner of the place, who quickly approached us.

A scholarly looking fellow in his mid-fifties, he said in rather clear English, “You are from England?”

“No, we're from Canada,” I replied.

“Welcome to my bookstore, please let me know if I can help you.”

After a few minutes of browsing the dusty shelves I found something of interest. I then found Isabelle and said, "This is exactly what I need right now."

"What do you have there?" she inquired.

"Bill Bryson."

"Oh, you love his books, don't you?"

"Indeed I do. This is awesome. I've got to get this one. It's been around for a while but I've never read it—*A Short History of Nearly Everything*."

"Go for it, Sweetie."

As I flipped through the pages I flashed back to some of the other Bryson books I'd read, including *In a Sunburned Country*, and *A Walk in the Woods*. They were wonderfully written and I could always put myself right there in Bill's shoes. Many of his stories were about his adventures while traveling. *I wonder if he's ever traveled around the world in one trip, and written about it.* I didn't know of very many books out there that talked about a trip that literally went around the globe like ours would.

With new book in hand we headed out for a bite to eat. "Let's go over there," I said to Isabelle, pointing to the only place on the street not selling trinkets.

"Let's check it out," she replied.

"It's called Café Coffee Day. Do you want to go in?"

"It looks cute, and more importantly it looks like it has air conditioning. Let's go!"

"Perfect. I could use a little air conditioning and a comfortable seat to read my new book."

As I scanned the menu I got a small jolt of excitement when I saw I could get my much loved café mocha. "Look, they have mochas. I like this place already."

We quickly entered and went up the stairs, getting blasted with what felt like arctic air.

"It sure feels good being out of that 35 degree heat and oppressive humidity. I'm okay with staying here for a while if you are."

"Absolutely. You know, maybe Goa isn't so bad." I took a long, flavourful sip of my mocha. "I guess I'm a bit hard on the place because Joshi has been such a pain in the ass."

"You're right; maybe it's not so bad after all."

Cochin (Kochi)

Cochin is famous for—of all things—its Chinese nets. The nets had been in use there for hundreds of years and were used for the daily catch in the coastal waters that lapped the shore. Men that worked the nets, I was told, toil for as many as 14 hours per day for the handsome daily salary of 100 Rupees (about \$2.50). In low season these men had to find work elsewhere and often turned to hawking trinkets on the street to tourists.

Day 105—Our guide, Jasil, and driver, Robert, took us to the Paradesi Synagogue in Jew Town, which was the oldest synagogue in India and perhaps the oldest anywhere outside of the Holy Land. There had been white and “dark” Jews there since the early 16th century but Jew Town was now home to only four families, numbering only 30 people, in an area that was once home to more than 3,000 Jews. The synagogue was run by the youngest of these, a 38-year-old woman, who looked entirely pissed off to be collecting the two rupee admission charge from each visitor.

Next door to the synagogue was the Dutch Palace, built by the Portuguese but then taken over when the Dutch conquered the area. Murals lined every wall and told stories about the thousands of Hindu gods. As Jasil told us about the gods Isabelle asked the question I had been wondering about too.

“How do you know that each god is who you say it is? You are telling us that this god or that god is in the form of this god or that god. How do you know that Shiva is in the form of Ganesh? Isn't it just Ganesh? How do you know?”

Jasil, a slight young man with enormous dark brown eyes, looked stunned. Clearly nobody had asked that before. He wasn't sure what to do or say. Time stood still as we eagerly awaited his response. I stopped breathing, not wanting to miss his answer by breathing too loud.

When was he going to answer the question? I looked at Isabelle, then back to Jasil, and then back to Isabelle. I could see that she was thinking the same thing I was: Is this guy ever going to answer? Was he unsure of what to say for fear of losing credibility with a couple of tourists? It felt like an hour before he finally replied. I expected a lengthy and learned diatribe chock full of facts and incredible insight. I was wrong.

“I'm not sure,” he replied.

What? That's all? I was deeply disappointed.

“That’s just what I learned, what was taught to me. I really don’t know anything other than what I was told, so I’m telling you,” he said sheepishly.

I suddenly felt bad for him. It was like the question had harpooned him right in the chest. His eyes dropped and he muttered something inaudible. I felt a sense of sadness in him and in myself too. I wanted to rescue him from the sinking ship he seemed to be on.

“That’s okay,” I replied. “It’s amazing that you can remember everything you are telling us. It all seems very complicated and you can remember hundreds of gods and goddesses.”

Suddenly Jasil’s chin lifted up and his big brown eyes met mine, almost saying, thank you for that. He quickly turned to direct our attention back to the wall where he continued to explain all that he had learned.

After having survived that awkward experience we moved our tour on to St. Francis Church. Originally built in 1503 it was the first Catholic Church established in India. The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, who discovered the sea route from Europe to India, was buried there in 1524 before his remains were taken to Lisbon in 1538. Over the centuries the church changed hands based on whichever European power was in charge in Cochin at the time: Portuguese, Dutch, and British. It was now owned by the Church of South India.

Amritapuri

“How long is it from Cochin to Amma’s Ashram?” I asked Robert, our driver, knowing it was about 120 kilometres.

“It will be a few hours,” he replied.

Robert, a tall, very dark, and surprisingly husky man in his mid-thirties, spoke very fast English, and it was not always easy to understand him. Along with being very prompt, polite, and professional, he was an excellent driver. He understood how to drive on Indian roads without killing us, himself, or anyone or anything else, which was quite a task. From what I had seen of India the infrastructure was not great, just slightly better than Bolivia, which, of course, was not saying much. The road quality was poor and in some places I wasn’t sure we were really even on a road at all. I would rather just call it what it was: dirt.

“On the map it doesn’t seem very far,” I said to Isabelle, as we sat in the back seat of the impeccably clean mid-sized car. “Then again, proximity doesn’t seem to mean very much here,” I added.

After what seemed like a lot more than “a few hours” we turned right off the main road onto what I could only describe as a path. Tree branches and low-lying brush on the side of the path passed by only inches away from the car as we went on.

“Holy shit, where the hell are we?” I asked Isabelle. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Are we getting close?” I asked Robert.

“Not far now,” he replied.

Suddenly I saw a large sign up ahead with a picture of Amma, known as the Hugging Saint to those of us in West, for her famous hugging blessings. We had traveled quite a long way off our planned route with our tour guide in order to spend a day and night in Amritapuri, home of Amma’s Ashram.

“We must be close,” I exclaimed, much more animatedly than I had intended. *I can’t wait to get there and get out of this car.*

Amma’s enormous ashram was attended by both her long-time devotees and curious visitors like us. It was a place for meditation and inner development but primarily it was a place for giving. The focus there was on giving back to the world and helping others in need, which was exactly what Amma had been tirelessly doing for decades. The 2004 tsunami hit the area hard and over 2,000 locals were killed and many more thousand were displaced. The ashram became home to countless people during that time and Amma continued to raise money to restore what was lost.

“This is definitely not OSHO,” I said to Isabelle, as we entered through the main gate.

There were no manicured gardens or stone walkways, just dilapidated buildings and dusty, barren ground. *This should be interesting.* Amma had caught Isabelle’s attention back in Canada as she had been on one of her world tours and made her way to Toronto. Isabelle was interested enough in her story to want to see her ashram in India—so there we were. Having been to OSHO I was comfortable with the idea of going to Amma’s ashram. After all, I had already worn a maroon robe for a week so how bad could it be?

“Any place that charges 150 Rupees (less than \$4) per night for international visitors is not going to be nice. This is not going to meet

your usual standards,” I said to Isabelle as we walked down the hall toward our room.

“Oh my god,” Isabelle blurted out as I swung the door open.

“Yep,” I said, “That’s about right.”

I scanned the room looking for some endearing quality to mention that would wipe the look of disgust and disbelief off her face, but alas, there was nothing to mention. The cot on the floor was at least as old as me and had no mattress. The sink countertop had only a handful of cleaning products on it. The floor was covered in dirt. The walls were a grimy white colour and had obviously not been painted in many, many years. I stepped into the room, maybe a 10-foot by 8-foot dungeon, peered around a corner into what I assumed would be the bathroom.

“Yep,” I said one more time, “That’s about right.”

“I can’t stay here,” Isabelle mumbled. “This is by far the most disgusting room I have ever seen.”

I couldn’t argue with her. It made our \$12 room in Bolivia look like a room at the Ritz.

“We can’t stay here,” she said, implying we needed to find something nicer, immediately.

“I don’t think we have much choice, Sweetie.”

After a long silence she said, “It’s going to be a *long* night.”

“You may be right.”

I was both looking forward to lunch, because I was very hungry, but also worried it would be as disgusting as the room. We were told that we could get lunch in the courtyard near the end; the end of what I was not sure. As we walked in what we thought was the right direction I started to hear some commotion. As we rounded the corner a line-up of people came into view. They all had a tray in one hand and a tin cup in the other as they shuffled along the line. One by one they moved forward, received a blob of something in their tray and a scoop of something else in their cup. Visions of prison line-ups from the movies came to mind as I watched these people, all Indians, get their lunch.

“I guess that’s where we go,” I said to Isabelle.

It was all very confusing as I tried to figure out which tray to pick up, as they were all wet and some only partially cleaned. I kept wondering if it was the clean pile or the dirty pile. *There is no way I am going to use one of these things because I am going to get sick for sure if I do.*

"They wash them there," Isabelle said, pointing to a large trough, the kind that animals drink from on farms.

"You've got to be kidding me," was all I could verbalize.

I watched people at the trough for some time, scrubbing their trays and emptying their cups. With a quick rinse they tossed them into a large bin where they were picked up by the next people in line. I watched in horror as one man brushed his teeth and spat in the trough; another put his lips to the tap to take a drink. Clearly the sign that read in bold letters: DO NOT DRINK THE WATER did not apply to him. As I suppressed the gag reflex that was building in my throat I noticed another man, a frail older gentleman, blow his nose by holding one nostril closed, the discharge spraying wildly throughout the trough. I thought I was going to throw up right there on the spot. I averted my eyes from the scene hoping to somehow forget what I saw so I could keep from throwing up all over the place. I figured the best thing to do would be to talk so I could stop thinking about it.

"Did you see that?" I asked Isabelle.

"I'm not eating here," she replied, letting me know that she did indeed see the teeth brushing, and tap sucking, and nose blowing. "We are going to get sick if we stay here," she concluded.

"I don't know where else we can eat, this seems to be it," I replied. "I hate the idea of staying here, eating what is surely to make us sick for the next few days, but I don't know where else we could go. This is hardly a tourist area so we aren't likely to find much else. Besides we'd have to summon Robert and get him to take us somewhere. Maybe we should take our chances."

It was an awful thought, and I could see in her eyes that she was thinking the exact same thing. She didn't like the idea either, but it looked like we were stuck. Reluctantly I turned to the large bin of glistening wet metal trays and grabbed one for each of us. *I've come all this way, been on the road for over a hundred days without being sick, and I may end up in bed for the next few days because of poorly cleaned dishes using unclean water.*

"Everyone's eating with their hands," I whispered to Isabelle, as we walked toward the only table. It was surrounded by at least two hundred Indians sitting on the ground.

"I don't see any cutlery, maybe this is how we're supposed to eat too," she replied.

This will make one heck of a story for everyone back home. I'd be able to tell my friends how I ate Indian food in India with Indians, using only my hands, and then got deathly ill. Great story. Needless to say, we didn't eat much. Thankfully we didn't get sick either.

As we finished washing our dishes in the snot-filled trough I noticed a part of the courtyard was partitioned off by a series of green mesh screens. I wondered what was behind the screens so I walked over to check it out. As I came closer I saw a bunch of tables, and a number of tourists sitting at them. We were the only tourists where we ate lunch yet all the other tourists seemed to be over there. I suddenly felt like a fool. The set-up at the ashram was obviously different for locals than for tourists. The locals ate local food, on the ground, with their hands, while the tourists ate tourist food, at tables, with utensils. I guess we missed that one. I could see a chalk board above an open serving area and listed on it were all the foods we were wishing we'd had rather than the fire-hot dhal I struggled to eat: sandwiches, fruit, baked goods, and coffee! I realized that we had options and we didn't have to eat off dirty trays with our hands for dinner.

Thekkady

Thekkady, a harrowing five hour drive from Amritapuri, was a wonderful place high in the mountains surrounded by tea and spice plantations. It was a real challenge getting there by car as the roads were crowded and intensely winding. Anyone who had driven the Road to Hana in Hawaii would appreciate the drive. The difference in India was that there were all manner of man, machine, and especially beast on the road. The incessant need of Indian drivers to honk and pass everything on the road (going a mere forty kilometres per hour uphill and around blind corners) took its toll on my body and my mind and I literally fell out of the car when we arrived at the hotel.

Thekkady and surrounding area (Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, including Lake Periyar) were very relaxing and enjoyable. The weather was a little bit cooler, especially at night, and the plantations were everywhere, providing amazing views amongst all of the many hills. We went on a spice plantation tour and I learned that I had absolutely no idea where my food came from or what work went into growing and preparing what I ate. I learned that all spice is actually one tree (as opposed to a combination of other spices,

as I had previously thought) and that cinnamon came from the bark of a tree.

Cruising the Backwaters from Kumarakom to Alleppey

Our houseboat trip would take us on Vembanad Lake from Kumarakom to Alleppey, where we would meet up with our driver, Robert, and then proceed to Trivandrum. Vembanad Lake is the largest lake in the state of Kerala and the longest in India. It was known by many different names depending on where in Kerala you happened to be. Our journey was an overnight cruise that would take us through the most unusual lake I had ever seen. The lake had many natural and man-made structures within it, on it, and over it that made it rather a maze to navigate. Amsterdam and Venice had canals, but this was something entirely different. Here, the canals or through-ways were too numerous to count and there were relatively few landmarks from which to gauge your whereabouts. It was like being in a water-city, where the streets were slender streams of gently lapping water and there were no stop signs at the corners to control traffic flow.

The houseboat, or kettuvallam, used to be a rice and spice barge, taking commodities ever so slowly to points on and around the lake. A British tourist got the idea many years ago to motorize it and put a thatched roof over the wooden hull in order to take tourists around. A new industry was born from this idea and today there are over 350 of them on the lake.

The boat is designed for two guests; a basic bedroom, a dinner table, two forward-facing chairs that look ahead past the broad shoulders of the driver, and a lounge-bed on which it would be extremely easy to fall asleep. It was quiet and serene, especially near shore as the lake was calm and flat. My mind was quiet as I took in the passing view. I felt more connected to Isabelle as it was just us, no other tourists, and no hustle-bustle of a busy and noisy city. Along with us was the crew, who do all they can to stay out of the way. Philip, our most gracious host, Anand, the driver, and Sugu, the engine mechanic, looked like they had been doing this for a very, very, long time.

Cruising in the warm early evening I looked out the front as the tall palm trees passed by. Homes—shacks, really—were scattered along the skinny fingers of land that jutted up out of the water only a few feet high and barely ten feet across in most places. Everywhere I looked I saw small

children running, playing, and swimming. Women washed their clothes in the water by twisting them up and smashing them against the rocks. Every once in a while I saw a family washing themselves, their dishes, and their clothes all at the same time. Even after seeing this hour after hour as we floated past I could not quite get used to it. Would I bring my clothes and dishes into the tub with me?

Time seemed to slip away slowly as I sat watching this strange world go past. The gentle vibration caused by the engine made my body relax like it hadn't in what seemed like a very long time. I moved slowly, I breathed deeply, I felt contentment in my heart. I eased into bed in the air conditioned room after dinner and dropped like a stone into deep sleep. Before I knew it, it was time for breakfast, and shortly thereafter we had arrived in Alleppey. We hopped into Robert's car and hit the road.

The way people passed on Indian roads was, to me, completely insane. At any given moment there were goats, cows, people, mopeds, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, trucks, buses, tuk-tuks, and the occasional elephant or camel all vying for an impossibly small piece of road. It didn't matter what the circumstance Indians believed they should pass whoever or whatever was in front of them with great urgency. It didn't matter whether they were going left, right, uphill, downhill, on smooth pavement or pot-holed, washboard, garbage strewn, third-world *road* (most roads in India would not qualify for a road as I was accustomed to; the word *path*, as I have eluded to earlier, is perhaps more apt; not unlike the deathtraps of Bolivia) the time to pass was *now*. And you must not do so without announcing it to the world with that ubiquitous horn honk. On several occasions all of the aforementioned road participants liked to have some fun by going four or five abreast along a narrow road going uphill into a blind corner just to see who would flinch first at the sight of the oncoming overloaded bus barreling down on them. Amazingly, not only did we survive this harrowing experience but, as far as I knew, so did every other person and animal we passed.

The main temple in Trivandrum is Sri Padmanabhaswamy. It could only be entered by Hindus so I wasn't sure why Robert brought us there. The museum adjacent to the temple is the Puthe Maliga Place Museum, which was once the home of the Travancore Maharajas. It was now home to many important artifacts, including a 3-metre-long gun that the locals captured from the Dutch some 200 years prior. The museum provided the guide and the group that day included about fifty Indians and us, the only

tourists. It felt like about 50°C in there, the dozen or so children in the group were running rampant, and the guide was only saying a few words in each of the many rooms she corralled us into.

After sweating off what seemed like a few pounds we made our exit and I ran straight for the shoes I had left at the entrance so we could get out of there and into some cooler air. The guy at the entrance that asked us to remove our shoes looked at me and asked for a tip—and I ignored him. The guide then explained to Isabelle how she usually got a tip too. Isabelle politely said no. We were both starting to get a little pissed off. I was really rather enjoying the fact that I hadn't faced these annoying requests for some time, yet here it was rearing its ugly head again. It was not as bad as Egypt of course, where people were looking for tips every minute and then asking for larger tips once you gave them one. The guide continued to hound Isabelle, implying that we were truly bad souls and would burn in eternal hellfire if we didn't give her and the shoe-man a tip. I was getting really pissed now, the venom starting to make its way to my tongue. Fortunately Isabelle gently grabbed my arm and guided me quickly out of sight.

Northern India—Delhi, Agra, and Rajasthan

Delhi

Sam's Guesthouse was a house only for occasional guests, such as us, according to Dr. Sharma, the owner of the place. Dr. Sharma was a man in his early seventies and after living in England with his wife for over forty years he decided to move back to Delhi to spend his retirement. I could only imagine how long his forty years of earning Pound Sterling would last them in India. A bit of a chatty Cathy, Dr. Sharma made it difficult to get in a word during a conversation. The only time he took a break from his constant diatribe was to draw in a big enough breath necessary to bark at his houseboy to come and attend to his present need. The frail young boy lived on edge waiting for Dr. Sharma to jolt out some kind of command—from answering the door to making his breakfast or clearing the table.

Dr. Sharma's two children, he told us, were born and educated in England and one was now in the U.S. and the other, also a doctor, was

in Australia. Clearly he was a very intelligent man and was living a great life in retirement. He was clear with us on several occasions that he was allowing us into his home simply as a favour to his friend Ashok, our host for the northern part of our Indian itinerary. He didn't need the money we were paying for the room; he was clear on that too. Had he mentioned it once it wouldn't have meant much to me and it wouldn't have registered in my mind. The fact he mentioned it several times made me really question why we were there. Did he not have any money? Did he rent out this room to make ends meet? Was he a phony? Was he really a doctor? Did he really live in England for forty years? Was it all a scam to make us gullible tourists feel comfortable? Regardless, the story—whatever it was—was sufficient for us. We had a comfortable room to sleep and a houseboy to fetch us breakfast.

We also had a house lady to wash our clothes—for a fee of course. When Dr. Sharma offered that we could have our clothes washed we of course said yes. Having been on the road a long time any opportunity to actually run soap and water over our beaten up rags was one not to be passed up. We were instructed to leave whatever we wanted washed in a pile outside the door of our room and the house lady would take care of it that day. Should I have been surprised to find out that it cost us the equivalent of \$13 U.S. to get our handful of clothes washed? At first I was somewhat surprised and then I remembered I was in India. *Nice nibble Dr. Sharma, nice nibble indeed.*

Depending on who you asked Delhi had anywhere from 13 to 30 million inhabitants—an incomprehensible number regardless. Old Delhi was the compact original city that was home to countless souls toiling away in filth to scrounge out a living selling almost everything under the sun. New Delhi was home to the comparatively wealthy, and spread for hundreds of square kilometers. It was assumed that if you were from the south part of Delhi that you had money so your prices on everything were different. Randomly spread throughout the city were *villages*—hundreds of them—that had no infrastructure to speak of because they popped up with no planning and no controls of any kind. Where there should be one power line carrying power to a neighborhood or street, off of which each household draws a line directly into their home, there were jumbled lines numbering in the hundreds, crowding every pole. Electricity was siphoned off into hundreds of homes, shacks, stores, and appliances, none of which were regulated or safe. Depending on whom you talked to the

random village anarchy can be blamed on any number of people, though Indira Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister, tended to get most of the blame.

Delhi had too many temples to mention and certainly too many to see. The main religions of India (Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Jain) were well represented in volume and quality of temples and holy sites. One of the most impressive was Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in all of India. Large enough to hold 25,000 people it was an imposing structure in Old Delhi. As with all temples and mosques across India it was necessary for visitors to remove their shoes before entering. I found this an interesting practice as I wasn't sure it had much to do with cleanliness.

Outside Jama Masjid was a sign that read: Remove Shoes; and next to it was an area where people placed their shoes before going inside. An old bearded man sat on a rickety wooden stool keeping an eye on the shoes, such that they didn't magically disappear. A rather angry looking woman stood under the arch that was the entrance to the temple. She walked over closer to where we were and stood not far away. I ignored her and turned to Isabelle.

"Do you want to go in?" I asked her.

"I'm not sure, do we have time?"

I considered this and decided that we did, and that we should go take a look. It was once in a lifetime that we'd be outside the largest mosque in India and one of the largest in the world. "Sure, let's go in. We have to kick off our shoes here though."

"Why is that woman staring at me?" Isabelle inquired.

I turned to see the same angry looking woman staring at Isabelle. She wore a scowl of contempt on her face and looked Isabelle up and down as she furrowed her brow.

"Maybe she doesn't like tourists," I offered.

"She doesn't need to stare at me like that. It's rude."

I looked again and saw that she was now looking at Isabelle's feet, and mine too. She saw that we both still had our shoes on. Was she mad at us for still wearing our shoes? We were still on *this* side of the sign, so we were fine, I thought. I looked at her feet and saw that she had shoes on also, but she was on *that* side of the sign. *She's the one who should be stared at, not us.* I felt my stomach tighten and the anger start to build up inside. I felt like I was being ridiculed for a terrible crime—wearing shoes somewhere

that I shouldn't—that I did not commit. And that scowl on her face was starting to really annoy me.

Isabelle was now staring back at the woman, throwing a look of equal disdain in her direction.

"She's pissing me off, staring at us like that when she's the one wearing shoes where she shouldn't," she implored.

The woman seemed to mumble something in our direction, cursing at us perhaps. Little did she know how very close I was to not just mumbling something, but yelling something at her. What did I care? I clearly would never see any of these people again and could care less if anyone looked at me while I let off some steam.

Isabelle was visibly upset now and shot another evil look at the woman. Isabelle had a gentle and kind soul and I'd never seen her that mad at someone. Her anger made me quake on my chicken legs but also made me very proud of her.

"Let's go in," I said. I kicked off my shoes, knowing I was going to have to tip the old guy on the chair as a thank you for not stealing my shoes while I was inside. Isabelle did the same and we both blew past the angry woman, nearly making contact.

"Have a nice day," I said facetiously as I passed.

Our guide, Ashok, wanted to give us the *authentic* tour (I hate that word, *authentic* when it comes to traveling. What does it really mean anyway? Is not authenticity in the eye of the beholder? How can I say that my trip to India was authentic and someone else's was not? What seems like authentic to me may not be to someone else, and vice versa. We all experience different things when we travel and the degree to which it is authentic is up to the individual's experience and expectation.) of the city so he took us through the teeming and smelly streets of Old Delhi to show us how locals live and work. This was all well and good except on a few occasions when he asked for directions, which I generally took to be a bad sign. The streets were overflowing with people and animals. The volume and flow of people reminded me of the concentration of people when leaving a stadium after a game—a crush of bodies all moving at full speed and not making much effort to get out of each other's way.

Ashok stopped in front of a vendor's stall—that is to say a large black pot full of some boiling concoction, on the side of the garbage-strewn road—and told Isabelle and me that we should try something to eat. As good as it smelled I knew I would pay for it later so I declined. Stall after

stall, shack after shack, vendors tried to sell their wares and their food to us. We were the only tourists anywhere to be seen, and we weren't going to buy anything so I assumed that the locals also bought from each other. It was not a contrived tourist hassle zone, it was a typical bustling Old Delhi street—*authentic* you might say.

Agra

The city of Agra was only about 200 kilometers from Delhi but took an excruciatingly long time to get to by car. As with all things in India nothing happens quickly, especially when driving. Agra is famously famous for two things: the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort; and we would see both that day.

The Taj Mahal was built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a memorial to his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal all in the name of love. Mumtaz died in 1631 after giving birth to their 14th child at the age of 39. Shah Jahan was so devastated by the loss of his wife that he set about immediately constructing the Taj Mahal in her honour. It took 22 years to complete. Not long after it was completed Shah Jahan was overthrown by his son Aurangzeb who apparently didn't like the fact that Shah Jahan had spent so much money, including the state's money, building the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan was put under house arrest at the nearby Agra Fort, where he spent the rest of his days. From his porch he gazed upon the Taj Mahal every night. It is said that he died on that porch in 1666. His remains were buried alongside Mumtaz.

As with the pyramids at Giza I was completely taken by the Taj Mahal, singularly focused on it and sensing absolutely nothing else around me. The sun glistened off it as though it were made of ice and snow. My eyes followed its outline, back and forth, left to right, up and down. I sensed my fingers drawing its outline as my eyes took it in. After who knows how long the chatter of other tourists, most of whom were Indian, quietly made its way into my awareness until it slowly broke my concentration. Another wonder of the world stood before me and I was paralyzed by it. I couldn't move, nor could I speak. I tried to form words to say something to Isabelle, who stood close by, but my lips simply would not cooperate. *That's okay. I'll save my words for something much more pedestrian than this. My breath would be wasted.*

The Agra Fort was only a short distance from the Taj Mahal but took much longer to get to than expected because a stubborn cow parked itself

in the middle of the road, impeding our progress for quite some time. “Only in India,” I said to Isabelle, with a smile. The Fort was a rather imposing complex in its own right. Our guide, Said, told us that it was started in 1565 by Emperor Akbar; it had had many additions throughout the following centuries, including those made by his grandson, the aforementioned Shah Jahan. The fort’s walls rose to 20 metres high and measured 2.5 kilometres in circumference. As impressive as the fort was I couldn’t help thinking about the Taj Mahal; the power of love was on my mind.

Rajasthan

I was told upon arriving in Rajasthan that it was an act of true insanity to travel there at that time of year because temperatures regularly reached 45°C. (Even my Indian friends back home told me I was crazy.) What people didn’t know was that I’d already been traveling the world for over 100 days and didn’t necessarily pick that time of year to be there, it just sort of worked out that way. When traveling for an extended period it was nearly impossible to be in a particular country or area at just the *right* time of year. The trip would have been much longer if we wanted to always avoid heat, cold, rain, high-season, low season, and the like. I wanted to smack someone in the face when they mentioned that we were there in the *hot* season. I could *tell* that it was hot.

Jaipur is the largest city in Rajasthan with, depending on who you talked to, anywhere from 2.4 to 3.5 million inhabitants. It was another dirty, smelly, and incredibly hot city, with lots of history. Jaipur offered something that had become dear to me in India—Café Coffee Day. When I saw the sign I got excited because I knew there was somewhere I could go to get my daily elixir in air-conditioned comfort. I could also get a snack that I was almost certain wouldn’t kill me, and I could sit in a comfortable chair and escape the bustling insanity outside. It had become my oasis in India and the sight of it made me feel like I was at home. The fact that Jaipur had at least one CCD—as I affectionately came to call it—made me like the city right away.

The city of Amber, the former capital of the region, is home to the Amber Fort and palaces. In order to reach the Fort it was necessary to ride an Elephant up the steep slope.

“Do you remember the last time we took an elephant ride?” I asked Isabelle as we stood in line to climb the stairs and hop on the elephant.

“It was Malaysia, in 2004, wasn’t it?”

“It sure was.”

“This is a little different, though. Back then we sat right on the elephant’s back whereas here we sit in a little carriage of some kind on its back.”

“Yes, but do you remember the entire ride?” I continued with a smile.

After a moment of reflection she replied “Oh, yeah, I remember it. We got dumped into that dirty river that the elephants had just shit in. That was disgusting.”

After enjoying a brief chuckle we were prodded ahead by the pasty-white English woman with the massive sun hat behind us in the line. I knew it would be different than the last elephant ride but I was excited to go because it looked like fun and it was certainly not something I would do very often in my life. The elephants all had colourful flowers and other designs painted on their bodies and ears. I felt like I was at the circus.

As I continued to stand in line waiting I couldn’t help but wonder if it was really necessary to take an elephant ride up the switchback road to the Fort. Why couldn’t we just walk up? I pondered. It seemed like a bit of a tourist trap. We weren’t offered any other mode of transport; we were only offered the elephant ride. Although we didn’t pay directly because we had already paid our travel company I could see at the ticket booth that tickets for rides were 800 Rupees each, or about \$20, which was a small fortune in India.

As we rode up I saw dozens of elephants coming back down to pick up more passengers. They all had elaborate and colourful designs painted on them and they all lumbered down the road only half acknowledging that we were there. Some were enormous, easily twice as tall as me, and others were smaller than the one we were on. I enjoyed the trip, looking out over the hills and quiet vista when I heard a strange sound. It didn’t come from the elephant; it was definitely human—a yelping or chirping sound. I looked around to see where it may have been coming from.

“Look there,” Isabelle said, pointing off to the right behind a large stone arch.

An Indian man came into view. He was rather smartly dressed in khaki pants and crisp white collared shirt. He was perched on the arch just above our heads and aimed a camera at us. I suddenly felt like a rock star, paparazzi all around snapping shots of me as I tried to relax. Clearly this guy thought he might sell us a picture of ourselves when we got to the top. In an instant I realized it but decided to smile anyway, as I was having a good time on the ride and the fact that a camera was stuck in my face was not going to faze me or ruin the moment.

The higher we got the more I needed to lean into the slope and the more I realized that my core muscles were clearly out of shape. Despite all the travel and sometimes less than ideal conditions I had not really worked out for over three months and it was starting to show. I hadn't done a real sit-up in a very long time and I felt it as we ascended the hill.

Nearing the end of the ride our driver, who hadn't uttered a sound in our direction the entire time, turned around and said something about a tip. I couldn't really make out what he said but it seemed that he was reminding us that we should give him a tip when we got to the top.

“Don't worry,” I reassured him. “You'll get a tip when we get there.”

Again he said, “Tip.”

Again I said, “Don't worry.”

I wondered if he couldn't hear me or if he was just pushy. Not more than thirty seconds later he reminded me again, and again I told him I had heard him and that he'd get a tip when we got there.

“What is wrong with this guy?” I asked Isabelle.

As we entered the courtyard where the ride would end he started to point to other tourists who were giving their drivers a tip as they got off their elephants. Again I told him I understood and that he'd get a tip. I was both frustrated at his rudeness and also somehow relieved that he was so forward as to ask for what he wanted. In some places the tip would be implied or maybe even a surprise demand and I would sometimes get pissed off. At least this jackass was clear about what he wanted. After disembarking I dug in my pocket and offered him what I thought was a fair tip. I felt like an idiot with my hand extended to him holding the cash as he turned to me and pushed my hand back.

“Not enough,” he said with a scowl.

I didn't know what to say or do so I continued to hold my hand out with the cash.

"Is not enough," he repeated, this time with a louder voice and an angry look in his eyes.

I felt the anger building in me again and I did my best to hold it back. *I'm going to offer this one more time and then I'm going to lose it on this jackass.* Maybe this was some kind of bargaining or haggling strategy or maybe the guy was just an asshole. Either way I struggled mightily to hold back the inferno developing inside me.

"Please, sir, take the tip. Thank you for the ride," I offered in the most friendly tone I could muster under the circumstances.

He simply turned and rode away, leaving me flabbergasted. I couldn't hold it back any longer. In a thunderous voice I let loose on him, in front of a couple dozen tourists, and unsuspecting elephants.

"Well, then, fuck you! You hassle the shit out of me to give you a tip so I offer you one—three times—and you don't want it? Well, fuck right off then. I'll give this tip to someone else that deserves it. Fucking jackass."

Man, did that feel good to get out. I felt like I had been holding my breath for the previous few months and I could now finally breathe. The air rushed back into my lungs and I felt like I was as light as a feather. My stomach loosened and dropped, as did my shoulders and back. I stood there, like a blob of boneless humanity, unsure what to do and not really wanting to do anything but enjoy the moment.

My blissful moment came to a crashing halt when I suddenly realized where I was; in a courtyard full of tourists, many of whom I then recognized were looking right at me. I turned to face Isabelle, awaiting the disappointed look in her face that I probably deserved.

She simply looked at me, reached out to hold my hand, and said, with a loving and soft look in her eyes, "Good job, Sweetie. I bet you feel better now."

It was amazing how in an instant her words changed me. At one moment I was gravely disappointed in the human race, the next I was happy to be traveling the world with my love, and experiencing the trials and tribulations of India.

The city of Pushkar is famous for its teeny, tiny, little lake, around which are 52 bathing ghats. The city is one of the five sacred dhams, or pilgrimage sites, for devout Hindus. It has only 15,000 residents so it felt

completely different from everywhere else I had been in India; that is to say spacious and quiet. Pilgrims travel there from all over India, and the world, to receive a puja (prayer) from a Brahmin priest in exchange for a donation.

As our guide brought us to one of the ghats my mind started working on what I would say when I was asked for the donation. I felt myself getting angry again. *Are these priests for real or are they there to swindle people for their donations? What if they are fake, does that make a difference?* My mind raced with thoughts as our guide walked us down some steps to within just a few feet of the famous lake. He turned and said something to the young priest who stood there with a blazing white set of teeth and ear to ear grin. *Here we go. This clown is going to try to weasel us, I know it. Why can't I let this thought go? Why do I care so much about being right? What difference does it make? Why can't I just let it go?*

"Hello," he said, in a deep, mild voice.

"Hello," I replied.

As he spoke I found myself completely ignoring him. I didn't listen to what he said but watched his lips move. I was looking for the evil in him; the facial expressions that said: you stupid tourist, I'm about to screw you out of some cash. I don't know how long he'd been talking when I realized Isabelle was talking to me.

"Sweetie, what do you want to do?"

I turned and looked at her, a bit confused. "Whatever you want is fine," I replied.

"Let's go ahead and get the prayer," she said.

"Okay," I said, not really knowing what I had agreed to. My mind was lost, still seeking something in the priest that may or may not have actually been there. *Let it go.*

The priest led us lower down the steps to the lake and told us to sit. He placed a plate in each of our laps and told us what each element in the plate was for and how we were supposed to throw these things into the lake. To me it looked like a colourful paint soup of reds and yellows with a mixture of curries and spices. My mind raced with negative thoughts about him and the stupid game he was playing. *I'm going to lose it again.* Suddenly I started asking myself what I was getting out of being angry. What did I gain by being mad about the situation? India was a frustrating place; many people had told me that, so why had I wasted so much energy wishing it wasn't? Maybe I just needed to give in. Maybe I just needed

to live in the moment, and enjoy it for what it was. These moments may never come along again so I should enjoy them while I could. Right there, I let go.

The priest told us that our families loved us and that our lives would be blessed. *He's right, just let it happen.* I began to feel very present. I felt the humid air on my skin, the hard marble step under me, and smelled the scent of the coconut, powders and spices deep in my nostrils. As I placed the flowers in the lake I saw the literally thousands of other flowers floating on top of the water. Hundreds of fish swarm around as I dumped the plate of powders and spices in, their gills flapping and mouths eagerly taking everything in.

Udaipur was an oasis for the heat-stroke suffering traveler. It offered what most places didn't in that part of the world: water. There were three lakes in the city and the largest contained the famous Lake Palace Hotel, which sat out in the water like a perfectly white dove relaxing in the sunshine. Like most palaces in Rajasthan it had been converted to a high-end hotel such that the reigning Maharaja could afford a lifestyle of leisure.

On Jagminder Island sat another palace of the same name, reached via a short one-hour boat ride around the lake. The boat ride itself was one of the most relaxing things I'd experienced in India. It quietly hummed along, free of touts and the insanity of the bustling streets. It even offered a slight reprieve from the murderous heat as the breeze cooled my sweat-laden skin. Other than Isabelle and I there was but one other solitary soul on a boat built for about thirty passengers; a woman from the UK, in her mid-thirties, dressed in a bright yellow sari. She was spending nine months in India seeking the best materials for her textile business back in England.

"That's an awfully long time to be in India," I said.

"I've been buying my materials here for a few years now and the best way to make sure I get the right materials and the best materials is to come here myself. It shows these vendors that I am committed to the business and that I plan to buy more from them in the future. They work very closely with me because of it and I have established many trusting relationships. India can be a very frustrating country for sure, but if you spend enough time here you'll see more of the beauty and feel less of the aggravation."

I pondered her comment for a moment and replied “I sure hope to feel less of the aggravation.”

It has been said that Udaipur is the Venice of the East (amongst other comparisons) and it certainly delivered via our little boat excursion. Standing in the courtyard of the palace and looking back to shore my mind had a hard time putting it all together: 500 year-old buildings stand at the edge of the shore, gleaming white against the deep blue water, in the middle of a hot, smelly city. In all of my imagination I had never envisioned such a place would exist in India. The calming lake and incredible views seemed to defy my logic and showed me some of the beauty the woman from England had been talking about.

In town we discovered, thanks to our guide book, a great European-style bakery and coffee shop. It was a quaint little joint serving up great coffee and rich desserts to (mostly) weary travelers. I had greatly enjoyed the Indian classics: dahl, butter chicken, naan, and, for my sweet tooth, gulab jamun, but I sure liked a big piece of chocolate cake once in a while too.

We struck up a conversation at the bakery with a young Canadian girl from Windsor, Ontario as we relaxed and watched the city walk by. She was moving to Spain the following week to be with her new boyfriend (who was from England) whom she had met two months prior at a yoga retreat in Goa. I couldn't help but think what an amazing story they would tell their children about how they met and got together. Those types of stories tend to spark my romantic side and make me love that part of travel where people from different parts of the world meet and fall in love in the midst of their adventure and decide to change their lives completely for each other. Fellow travelers in love always made me smile.

Of all the major religions in India the smallest by far is Jainism. An offshoot of Hinduism, Jainism has a number of very specific practices, including eating no animals and no fruits or vegetables that grow below the soil. Despite their numbers being rather small compared to the other major religions the gifts of their ancestors are truly stunning, particularly their most famous accomplishment: the temple complex in Ranakpur.

Perhaps the only reason anyone knows of this tiny town is because of these temples, and it was enough to have developed a thriving tourist trade there. The main temple, known as Chaumukha Mandir (four-faced temple), was built in 1439. It consisted of 1,444 pillars of white marble, all different, and all intricately designed by hand. I was reminded by our

guide that another practice of Jainism is not to bring anything derived from the sacred cow into the temple. This meant I had to not only take off my shoes, but also remove my leather wallet. Inside the temple it was whisper quiet, save for the shuffling of the feet of only a handful of tourists. It was over 40°C outside but inside was much cooler and pleasant.

Unlike at any of the temples I had visited to that point in India, or on the trip, I didn't feel an impending anxiety over the very likely request for a tip from the guide, or some other request. The kindly older gentleman in the white robe wasn't so much our guide as he was a guide for anyone who happened to be in the temple at the time, and in this case there were perhaps six or eight of us. He didn't pressure us to follow him or listen to him or give him anything. It was a pleasure to just listen to him talk and express how, though he had been in the temple literally thousands of times, it was still a marvel to him. I sensed his authenticity and was swept up in his descriptions of such a magical place.

Surrounded by the pillars I felt as though I was on a giant chess board and the pillars were the playing pieces. Each was different, each had its own story, and each was crafted by someone different. The pieces in my imaginary game came to life to tell me who made them and what their designs meant. I found myself lost in the maze of their numbers, losing my orientation and just meandering through them wondering how it was possible to create such a magnificent structure, the roof held up by my chess pieces for over 500 years.

Rising high above the city of Jodhpur is the amazing Mehrangarh Fort. Sitting atop a 125-metre high hill overlooking the city—sometimes called the Blue City because of the many blue-painted houses—and still run by the Maharaja of Jodhpur, the fort follows the lines of the hill and has a total of seven gates. Our guide, Sundeeep, a bright-eyed, handsome, and well-spoken young man, told us that the gates were constructed in such a way that potential invaders would have a hard time breaking through. At the time the main way to break through such a gate was by elephant, specifically an elephant that had enough room to build up speed and ram the doors. The fort's design was such that there was very little space to build up speed and thus the gates were rarely threatened. I thought it was interesting that creating something with a lack of space was a good thing—especially in a country where there is a decided lack of space nearly

everywhere, resulting in over a billion people living, working, and playing literally on top of each other.

The fort contained a museum showing a collection of royal wares from the past four or five centuries. In town, the clock tower was a tourist landmark that sat amid the insanity that is the Sardar Market—a collection of what is believed to be about 10,000 merchants selling everything from spices and clothing to gadgets and animal parts. As I glanced around at the seemingly endless stalls and hectic flow of humanity Sundeep leaned in and told me “Everything is possible in India, but it’s not always possible all the time.” In his own sarcastic way Sundeep told me that even though it was possible to get almost anything in the market, including items of questionable legality, it may not be available at that exact moment.

On the fringe of the tourist map of Rajasthan is Jaisalmer, a town of 50,000 or so inhabitants (many military, due to its proximity to the border with Pakistan) seemingly in the middle of nowhere. It was a town known for camel rides and safaris and not much more. Until tourists started arriving, the sunbaked little town about a hundred kilometres from Pakistan was an afterthought to almost everyone, except the military of course. With the advent of camel safaris tourists started coming, and before long Las Vegas-sized hotels started popping up. With not much more to see or do, save the Jaisalmer Fort, if you were not on a camel you were on a lounge chair by the pool.

After a short ride out of town our driver dropped us off near a gathering of camels and other tourists. I said to Isabelle “I didn’t know there were that many more tourists here. I’ve felt like it was pretty much just me and you these past few weeks.” The gathering of perhaps twenty tourists was almost a shock. As they slowly began to mount their camels I looked around to see which ones Isabelle and I would get.

Seemingly out of nowhere a man appeared—our guide I presumed—and told us to get on two camels he’d pointed at. He looked a little like a man-sized version of the sand people from *Star Wars*. If he’d fallen down I didn’t know if I would have been able to find him in the sand. He was clothed in tattered grey and brown-coloured rags and his face was so dark and weather-beaten I could barely see his eyes. With a few quick movements we were both astride our camels and heading toward large dunes in the distance following a faint trail in the sand. It occurred to me that I was doing exactly what I said I did not want to do back in

Egypt—riding a camel. I must have said no to the camel ride offer at least a dozen times back in Giza yet there I was hopping aboard the smelly beast in India. I suppose the difference is that there were no pyramids to see, forty kilometres from Jaisalmer, and I was not being pestered to death with the offer. It felt like a fun adventure, not a tacky, forced, money grab. It was interesting how my perspective changed the experience.

About twenty minutes later I found myself sitting high on a fluffy sand dune with Isabelle; our camels crouched down nearby, seemingly watching the same sunset we were. Again I was struck with a *Star Wars* reference as I looked out over the desert in the waning sunlight. This time, of course, there was only one sun going down, not two, like in the movie. Suddenly a young boy appeared, asking if we wanted a cold drink, a Coke or Sprite.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“Maybe your guide would like one?” he replied.

I started trying to piece together the scam and in an instant let it go. I looked to our guide sitting not far away and asked, “Would you like a drink?”

“No thank you, sir. I am okay,” he replied.

The boy, no more than eight or nine years old continued, “He may say no to be nice. Maybe you buy him one?”

Rather than argue with him and let him ruin the moment I was trying to have with Isabelle I agreed to buy one. He scurried off and scrambled down the dune. A few minutes later he appeared with a glass bottle full of what I could only assume was a reasonable facsimile of Coke.

“Thanks,” I said, giving him the few Rupees he asked for, and hoping he’d disappear so I could watch the rest of the sunset. Alas, he waited there, as I figured out rather quickly, to take back the bottle for reuse with another tourist.

I took a chance and assumed the guide could speak more than basic tourist-English. “Are you from around here?”

He looked into the distance and said “I live about one-hour’s camel ride that way,” pointing toward the setting sun.

“Do you have children?” Isabelle asked.

“Yes, I have two.”

I thought about how he would have time to see his kids, given he *drove* an hour each way to work and didn’t go home until the sun went down, and I realized that he likely didn’t see them very much at all. The irony of

the situation hit me—he was just like many Westerners who spent hours per day commuting, working long hours and then arriving home after the kids had gone to bed. I guess some things really were universal.

Back at the hotel I was reading an article in the Hindu Times: Should husbands be held accountable for wives whose mobile phone bills go unpaid? Arguments were made that since husbands are in charge they should be accountable. The wife didn't work, after all, so it was his money. The contrary argument was made: Why does she have a mobile phone anyway? She stays at home all day. I couldn't stop my head from shaking back and forth in disbelief. What was this, 1958? I suddenly felt no reason to continue reading the Hindu Times.

After arriving back in Delhi we did a bit of trinket shopping and absorbed our last bit of India. Over the past five weeks I had seen and done an awful lot in India. I had been incredibly pissed off, amazed, happy, bitchy, frustrated, awed, and vexed. I had questioned virtually everything about mankind, myself, my beliefs, and my understanding of my place in the universe. I guess that was the beauty of India and why so many people traveled there. Though I had experienced death by a thousand cuts, I had also sunken into the mystic powers of the many temples and palaces. I had seen, heard, smelled, tasted and felt things that simply did not exist anywhere else. I had mingled amongst 1.2 billion souls and felt as though we were all one, yet never felt so alone.

My India experience was complex, on many levels. It was magnetic, yet repulsive. It was inviting, yet closed. It was everything and nothing at the same time. I didn't know what to expect before coming to India but I was glad I came, and equally glad to leave. I felt as though I had left a small part of my soul there, a small part of my flesh, and a small part of my heart. Someday I would likely come back to reclaim those pieces, and likely leave other, different, ones in their place.

The Indian “Head Bobble”

The Indian *head bobble*, (the name I gave it as it reminded me of the bobblehead collectible doll) that little nuance that my Indian friends in Canada warned me about, was really quite something to see on a day to day basis. I understood now how fellow travelers had been so confused and frustrated during their trips to India. The head bobble was characterized

by a slight nod or tilt of the head accompanied by an almost imperceptible rotation (to at least one side, sometimes both) along with a smile (to varying degrees) and a sound that emanates from the throat which could be taken, or *mis*-taken, as acknowledging the affirmative, or negative, of a question or statement.

In this way the response you got could mean “yes,” “no,” “maybe,” “left,” “right,” “10 Rupees,” “110 Rupees,” “open,” “closed,” “today,” “tomorrow,” “sometimes,” “never,” and a great number of other things that cause confusion, frustration, and possible anger. The bobble, and its component parts—the head movement, the facial expression, and the throat sound—clearly had a multitude of combinations, hence the frustration experienced by foreigners and the need not for double clarifications, but often triple, just to be safe. What I learned was to not ask direct questions. Instead of asking if the store was open on Monday (which elicits a Yes or No, which can easily be misunderstood) I asked what days the store was open.

Nobody had ever been able to explain to me why the head bobble existed. Everyone just shrugged their shoulders and told me that it was just the way it was. A great moment of clarity came to me on the point much later as I listened to an audiobook on my iPod. Deepak Chopra, the international bestselling author, in his book *Life After Death*, shed light on something very simple about the Indian culture that seemed to make sense, though it did not explain things perfectly. In his book he said “Indians are relaxed about terminology, as befits a very old culture.” He went on to say, “We use God, Rama, Shiva, Maheshvara [to describe the consciousness that created everything]. The most important thing wasn’t the name but the concept . . .”

As I heard this I found I was nodding my head too! It made sense that a culture so rich, complex, and long-lived might not be as hung-up on precision as we are in the West. Approximation was sufficient because precision might not be possible, so why worry about it? Maybe the museum is open, maybe it isn’t. Who cares? Will the world be dramatically altered if it is, or isn’t, as you expect? At the end of the day it doesn’t really seem to matter, does it?

I am Indian

My first real experience *as an Indian* came after leaving a small museum in Cochin on an incredibly hot day. Outside of the museum was a small park with a number of shade-providing trees that Isabelle and I stood under for some relief from the screaming hot sun. I noticed a small kiosk not far off selling ice cream.

“Do you want a little ice cream?” I asked Isabelle.

“Sure, that sounds like a good idea on a day like this.”

As I approached the kiosk I noticed that there was no lineup, just a jumbled mass of men with what seemed like a hundred small children, all jockeying for position. I stood patiently and observed the scene, trying to figure out how I was going to handle the situation, especially given my tendency in India to get a little pissed off and frustrated.

My first thought was very Canadian—wait patiently for my turn. My next thought was American—raise my voice and demand service. My third thought was Indian—just go get it. In India, it seemed, with over a billion other souls going after the same things as you, including such valuable commodities as space, time, or even ice cream, you just went and got what it was you were after with no second thoughts and no tentativeness. I quickly dropped all notions of myself as gentle and patient. I dropped my desire for the personal space I so cherished. I also forgot the fact that I would never normally barge my way into any situation and take what I wanted. I put on my best Indian attitude, one that was comfortable in all situations and was not concerned with what anyone else might think or say.

I approached the kiosk, deciding to force my way into the chaos at a point where the mass of humanity was only three men deep. I picked a spot right behind a slightly built man with two young boys hanging off the legs of his pants. He couldn't have been more than five and a half feet tall and he was one of the few who were not forcing a handful of Rupees into the faces of the men behind the counter. I squeezed in past him quickly and rolled off the shoulder of the man after that, another fairly short man whom I caught off balance. With only one layer of humanity left to pass I stopped ever so briefly to catch my breath and surveyed the scene. The man directly in front of me was waving his cash at the vendor but was not getting any attention. This was it; I thought to myself, this was my chance.

I turned sideways and slid my shoulders and hips just slightly and thrust my much longer arm into the vendor's face.

"Two vanilla please," I said as forcefully as I could without yelling.

Above the din of the ruckus I wasn't sure he heard me so I repeated myself: "Two vanilla please."

The man snared the cash from my hand in a cobra-like movement so quick I didn't even see it happen, only felt the emptiness of my hand, and he spun to fetch my ice cream. I stood almost in disbelief at what I had done and a smile cracked my face. For an instant I stopped myself from smiling, wondering what the others in the jumble might have thought of me. Then I realized that they didn't care. They were not thinking anything about me. They didn't care that I was smiling and they didn't care that I forced my way to the front in order to get ice cream. They weren't thinking about me because they were thinking about *themselves*. I'd never see these people again and I shouldn't care either. Why did I? Why should I? It was in my nature, I supposed. That was what it meant to be a Westerner. In India, they didn't care. It wasn't a hurtful or mean thing; it was simply that they didn't want to waste the energy necessary to concern themselves with me, or anyone else for that matter.

The density of over a billion people, the collective weight of thousands of years of culture, and the need to fight nearly every minute of every day for time and space had forced each person to focus only what helped them survive. In Canada, I had no such concern. I could escape nearly any situation and could concern myself with much more than basic survival. Hence, I worried about other people's opinions and views of me. I concerned myself with people I would very likely never speak to nor see again. India truly was a different world and for a very few moments I had stepped outside of my normal ways and became Indian, or at least more like an Indian than I had ever been before.

Asia

Thailand—Coffee shops and tigers

Chiang Mai

Thailand was the only country on my around-the-world odyssey that I had already been before. The last time I was there was in 2004, which was significant for two reasons: I proposed marriage to Isabelle on the beach in Koh Phi Phi and the tsunami struck three months later and wiped out everything, including that beach. Just before arriving in Bangkok from Delhi a cyclone had ripped through neighbouring Myanmar (Burma). I hoped I wasn't bad luck somehow.

The last time we were in Thailand we explored Bangkok and the southern beach destinations of Koh Phi Phi and Railay Beach. This time around there was only one stop: the beautiful northern city of Chiang Mai, a city that had it all: mountains, lush greenery, incredible wildlife, and all the amenities of a large modern city. With only about a million residents it was much smaller, cleaner, and quieter than Bangkok.

Our hotel, the Amari Rincome, was a welcome surprise and an absolute steal. The room was big, modern, comfortable, and super-clean; just the way we like it. The roads in Chiang Mai were clean, there was hardly any traffic, and, unlike India, there was virtually no horn honking. Also absent from the roads were cows, sheep, camels, goats, oxen, piles of dung, rotting carcasses, and trash. I didn't hate India for these things but I was ready to leave, and I was glad to be in Chiang Mai.

Just for kicks I picked up a local real estate magazine to see what it would cost to buy a place there. After about thirty seconds of browsing

the magazine I rather swiftly placed it back where I found it. The real estate market there was very hot and the property developers had clearly identified a group of wealthy tourists as potential buyers. We were not those buyers, at least not yet. Other than real estate most things were reasonably priced. The dollar went a long way on food, entertainment, handicrafts, and, of course, the famous Thai massage.

Day 128—We had a coffee and a light lunch at Happy Hut, one of many coffee shops near the hotel. Isabelle was flipping through design magazines, an ear to ear smile across her face. I was looking at the massive mocha blended coffee they had put down in front of me and wondered how I would be able to finish it all. We'd had coffees and tuna sandwiches at Wawee Coffee across the street the day before. Starbucks was another fifty meters down the road. It was hard to believe that this was Thailand and not Toronto, or New York, or any large North American City, offering a branded coffee shop experience on every corner.

The Night Bazaar and Saturday Market provided excellent shopping, mostly for tourists of course. Hardly any of the hundreds of shopkeepers even said a word to me, quite opposite to what I had been experiencing the previous four months. Most were quiet, gracious and helpful. After over a month in India being in Chiang Mai was a real pleasure. Even the inflated tourist prices were very cheap compared to back home. We had dinner at the food court at the Night Bazaar for a couple dollars—a flashback to our previous trip to Thailand when we discovered how incredibly cheap it was there.

Next day we hung out at Caffè Nero, yet another coffee shop near the hotel. We also went to Country Café for a bite of lunch and in the process had our pictures taken for a local décor magazine that was highlighting the place. I wondered if I'd ever come across that picture on the Internet one day.

"While we're here I want to go to a cooking class," Isabelle said to me.

"That's a great idea. I think it's easy to sign up for one at the front desk of the hotel," I replied.

"I'll go check it out and sign us up," she responded.

The next thing I knew we were in a tuk-tuk cruising through the streets of Chiang Mai on the way to learn how to make Thai food. Within seconds I was completely lost and had no idea which direction we were heading. The tuk-tuk driver seemed unfazed by the oncoming traffic in

the narrow side streets and swerved just enough to enable the oncoming cars to slip past us within inches of my knee as it hung out the side.

I kept my eyes peeled for a sign or something that would indicate we were close to our destination, a place called Smart Cook. As I regained my balance after whipping around another corner I spotted a small sign hanging from the porch of a thatched-roof house.

"It looks like we're here," I said.

"That was an interesting ride, wasn't it?"

"I hope I'm able to eat after that crazy ride over here."

Within seconds a smiling young woman jumped out to greet us. She said her name, and then spelled it for us: M-A-R-K. I was still trying to process this rather unfortunate choice of names for a woman when she offered us an important clarifying point: "Don't worry; I'm not a lady-man."

Mark was a recent graduate of Chiang Mai University, majoring in English, and had a great wit about her. Her physique was rather manly, though she had a plump and pretty face. Despite her medium height she seemed the kind of girl that could knock you on your ass if she wanted to. She was truly interested in what she was doing and was interested in us too.

"You are from Canada?" she inquired. "I've never met anyone from Canada."

I couldn't help myself and replied, "I've never met a lady in Thailand named Mark."

She picked up my sarcasm and threw it right back at me, "People from Canada are funny, no?"

I turned to Isabelle with a broad smile and said "I think I'm going to enjoy this."

As it turned out we were the only students that particular evening. It was low season and there were many fewer tourists than usual.

"You can put your shoes back on because we're going to the market for supplies," Mark instructed.

She took us through the back streets and alleys of Chiang Mai on foot to a market we would never have found otherwise. Mark told me that it was a local market and tourists would generally never come there. I was struck by the sight of skinless chickens hanging from the rafters and boiling pots of who knows what giving off a hot and smelly steam.

Mark took us to get some vegetables first. I had no idea what I was looking for so I just followed her lead. She explained what some of the vegetables were but it went in one ear and out the other. Isabelle was genuinely intrigued by everything Mark told us, paying close attention to every word. Next was the selection of spices—curry, and a whole bunch of other things I was clueless about. Mark paid the vendor with lightning speed as they exchanged a series of knowing looks and head nods. I got the feeling Mark came there with all of her cooking students and was therefore somewhat of a high-rolling customer that got special treatment.

Each time Mark made a purchase she handed me the bag and I quickly became the grocery boy as well as her assistant. All the time she was talking I was trying to pay attention to what she was saying but also take in the market atmosphere. We were the only tourists in sight and I swear the only people under the age of 80. As I looked around all I saw were very old, tiny, little grandmothers, weighed down by heavy sacks of vegetables, shuffling along at a pace that defied their burden.

The sweat was rolling off my forehead as I stood at the stovetop mixing the ingredients for my spring rolls. Flies and other bugs were everywhere, drawn to the scents coming from my soon-to-be masterpiece meal. Fortunately Mark had provided us with tiny little mesh screens to put over top of our bowls of ingredients otherwise we'd be getting a bit more protein than we'd planned. I followed Mark's instructions every step of the way but I knew I was going to forget how to do it again in about ten minutes. I turned to Isabelle to see how she was doing at her stove.

"Are you having fun Sweetie?" I asked.

"This is so cool. I love Thailand!" she blurted out with a huge smile on her face.

"This is pretty cool, but I'm going to forget how to do this when we get home."

"That's okay. Just enjoy it while we're here."

Such words of wisdom—*just enjoy it while we're here*. I could always count on Isabelle to say just the thing I needed to hear.

The end result of our toil was spring rolls, coconut soup, curry phad thai, and sticky mango rice for dessert. Despite having absolutely no skill in the kitchen I was quite surprised that my efforts yielded a rather tasty meal. For the equivalent of about \$30 we got the class, the food, the tuk-tuk ride there and back, and copies of the recipes. It was a bit of a treat given our budget but we needed to eat anyway. As I sat on the floor

at the low table savouring my dessert I knew I was going to tell people about the experience and tell them what a great thing to do it was. I chuckled knowing that I was going to tell those same people that our teacher, despite having a name like Mark, was not a lady-man.

The next day I enjoyed yet another café mocha at Caffè Nero. As I wrote some notes in my book my pen ran out of ink. It wrote for 130 days and then died. I was amazed it lasted that long. I asked the waiter if I could borrow a pen and he tossed me one from behind the counter. As I started to scratch something out on the page I noticed the pen said *Made in India* on it. For some reason this struck a chord within me and I started to giggle.

“What are you laughing at?” Isabelle questioned.

“I just think it’s funny that we’re in Thailand and this pen says *Made in India* on it.”

She looked at me with a tilted head and narrowing eyes. “What’s funny about that?”

“I don’t remember seeing anything in India that said *Made in Thailand* on it.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it was funny.”

“Drink your coffee, Sweetie.”

One thing I had wanted to do since we arrived in Thailand was get a Thai massage. I had only ever had one Thai massage before, on my last trip to Thailand in 2004. Isabelle and I decided we’d get a combination massage this time, which included a relaxation portion and a then the real Thai massage portion. I supposed the first one was to loosen you up for the ass kicking you typically get in the second portion.

When I came out of the tiny little change room holding the extremely small towel around my waist I spotted Isabelle sitting on a bench outside the ladies change area and whispered “Are you ready for this?” Before she could reply two women, who I assumed were masseuses, appeared out of thin air and guided us to our rooms.

My masseuse was a frail yet very pretty young woman who could not have been more than 18-years-old. She smiled broadly and asked me in nearly undecipherable English what I would like her to do. I refrained from my usual sarcasm, which the moment was screaming for, and asked that she just use medium pressure on my tight shoulders and back. As she laid her hands on me I realized that this tiny young thing probably didn’t have

the power to deliver a medium-pressure massage. My regular masseuse back home, Jennifer, despite being of slight build also, had powerful and magic hands that could unlock my muscles just by looking at them. I was forced to put things into perspective and realized that this was not likely going to be a Jen massage. It wasn't.

My masseuse for the Thai massage portion was, on the other hand, rather manly looking, though I was pretty sure she wasn't a *lady-man*. Her face was very masculine with a refined jaw and protruding chin. My eyes lowered to her hands and forearms only to find two massive meat hooks swinging from the ends of two thick tree trunks. Suddenly my heart started to beat faster as I considered what that might mean. I was struck by flashbacks of my first Thai massage. I was nauseous after that one and I was worried the same thing would happen this time too. I was also worried she was going to rip my skinny body apart with those massive meat hooks.

I tried desperately to forget about the past and live in the moment—like the moment my balls got squashed, followed by the moment my hamstrings yelled *stop!* And the moment my sphincter tightened as she rammed both thumbs into the base of my spine where my ass cheeks meet. I flashed back to the thrashing I took at the hammam in Istanbul and considered the present moment in contrast. Istanbul was more of a street-fight kind of beating; this was more of a martial arts kind of beating. Actually, it was more of a manipulation—of my body into uncomfortable positions. It was part massage, part chiropractic adjustment (sorry Dr. Marshall, this doesn't count as cheating because I didn't know what I was doing. I'll be setting up an appointment to see you when I get back), part muscle ripping stretches and part thrashing.

When it was all over I laid there like a professional wrestler who had just been pinned after being smashed over the back and head with a chair and plowed into the turnbuckle face-first at full speed. I was afraid to move for fear of the shooting pain I was sure to feel in my arms, legs, and private area. I tried to breathe normally and move ever so gently. First, I lifted my right arm and position it such that I could lean on it to peel the rest of my lifeless body off the table. Good, no pain. I eased onto my elbow and shifted my weight to my right hip. So far so good. Then I brought up my right knee and rocked my hips to the sitting position. There it was—a *screaming hot sensation in my groin*. I bit my lip so as not to cry out like a girl. Slowly, ever so slowly, the heat dissipated and I could breathe again.

Afraid to move but knowing I had to I forced my shoulders around and rocked up to a full sitting position. I felt a sense of accomplishment like nothing ever before, knowing I had made it that far and not passed out or died.

My lower back then started to seize and I felt the muscles of my upper back start to twitch. I stopped the seizing by tightening the muscles around my spine. That stopped the seizing but by doing so I had set off a firestorm of shooting needles into the base of my spine, through my anus, and directly into my balls. *Death was near.* Then I talked myself through it: Don't forget to breathe. Just slip off the table onto the floor and you'll be fine. Just slip off and stand up. You can do it.

With all of my might I tightened my ass cheeks to force my centre of gravity forward to allow my beaten body to slide off the table. I came down onto the heels of my feet, jarring my insides and sending a thunderous jolt into my spine and slamming my brain into the base of my skull. I was deafened for what seemed like an hour and then I realized I had done it; I was off the table and standing upright. Yes! I'd made it.

Then the self-talked kicked in again. What an idiot I was for doing this. Why did I want to do this, anyway? I didn't know but I needed to get out of there. *Make your legs work; come on, get one leg in front of the other!* Thankfully my lower body was then numb so the pain was gone, but I had no control over my legs. My lower back cringed in spastic pain as I swung my right leg forward and planted it solidly on the floor. *Great, do it again.* Then the left leg moved. The feeling started to return to my legs by way of millions of tiny knife wounds in my calves and on the tops of my feet. It was just like when your foot comes back to life after falling asleep, only it hurt like hell. Suddenly I found myself in full flight, swiftly shuffling across the floor in a mad dash for the door. Within moments I was out, dressed, and starting to come back to life. I couldn't believe I actually paid for this pain, *again!*

Standing on the street with Isabelle afterward I realized I didn't feel nauseous like I did the first time. That was good. I did, however, feel a bit violated. As I tried to regain my composure I remembered that one of the key benefits of subjecting oneself to such agony is that the Thai massage is known to very quickly rid the body of its toxins. Given how my body reacted to the massage I must have been a toxic wasteland inside. A small measure of satisfaction came over me at the thought of being toxin-free. If only my balls didn't hurt so much.

The next day Isabelle and I talked over breakfast about our plans for the day.

"I'm tired of doing tours and going places with groups. Let's do our own thing today, okay Sweetie?" I said.

"Okay, let's figure out how to do that," she replied.

"I'll bet the little man at the front desk can help us with that. I'm sure we're not the only people to want to do our own thing here."

The little man was indeed helpful. He ordered us a taxi, advising that we could negotiate an itinerary and fare with the driver. I asked him what would be appropriate and felt comfortable with my plan. Strangely, I didn't have any of the anxiety and trepidation I had had in so many other places on the trip when it came to negotiating. I somehow felt that it was going to be easy, so much easier than India or Egypt.

"What's your name?" I asked the driver of the rather worn-down mid-sized car.

"My name is Yot," he replied.

I told him we were looking to spend part of the day seeing a couple of sights and we were prepared to pay to keep him with us throughout the day.

"1,500 baht," he suggested.

"That seems pretty expensive, Yot. How about 750 baht?" I replied.

As soon as I said it I realized how different the negotiation felt. It seemed like fun, like a legitimate exchange for a legitimate experience. For more than 130 days I'd done an awful lot of negotiating and throughout most of it I felt like I was being treated like an idiot tourist; like I was being taken advantage of in some way. I often had the feeling that even if something was agreed upon the details would change unbeknownst to me until it was too late. Yot, however, seemed to be dealing straight with me. He wasn't going to screw me and tell me that the price we agreed on was only for the trip out, not the trip back, or something similarly ridiculous. He didn't seem like the kind of guy that would abandon the deal at some point during the day.

"I will take you for 1,000 baht," he replied.

"You have yourself a deal, Yot."

For the first time since I had arrived in Thailand I felt like a real tourist. For the previous several days I had been living like a local, going to coffee shops and local establishments within a short walking distance of

the hotel, literally hanging out and not trying to do too much. Once I got in Yot's car, however, I knew I was a tourist, and that was fine by me.

I had no interest in being dragged to some of the usual tourist places—elephant farm, monkey farm, snake farm, bamboo rafting and forced trinket buying—so I instructed Yot to take us to the Tiger Kingdom, Mae Sa Park (home of the 10-tier waterfall), and then to Wat Chedi Yot (I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to go to a Wat that had the same name as our taxi driver).

In the end, the highlight was definitely the Tiger Kingdom. At first it seemed just a little too tacky and staged—the exact reason I didn't want to go to the elephant farm (plus, I had already done the elephant ride in Malaysia in 2004 and another one just recently in India and I had no interest in seeing elephants paint, kick around a soccer ball, or do tricks)—but it turned out to be exhilarating. We were brought into the tiger cages with three girls from France so there were only five of us, not the dozens I feared would join us.

Inside the cage were three young tigers—all about six months old—that we were able to pet and observe up close. Their handlers seemed to have no fear at all and dealt with them in a rather nonchalant manner but I was on an adrenaline rush when I touched the tigers and felt the heat from their bodies. They were very playful and actually rested long enough for us to get a few minutes of petting and a few pictures. They were incredibly cute despite scaring the hell out of me. Isabelle's favourite was one called Pancake—a very gentle and docile yet powerful beast. She knelt beside Pancake and stroked her fur, rubbed her back and talked gently to her. Isabelle seemed almost in a trance and Pancake seemed to enjoy the loving attention. The guide told us that soon Pancake would be too big and unmanageable for visitors to touch. She would nearly double in size in the next six months and then be put behind bars away from tourists.

Close by in a separate cage was a baby leopard. He was very young and much smaller than the six-month old tigers. He was apparently just recently captured in the wild so he was pretty pissed off about being in a cage. He bared his large front teeth and hissed loudly at us as we walked past. Isabelle and I joked with each other about finally seeing a leopard on our trip. We searched hard for one in Kruger National Park in South Africa earlier in the trip but weren't lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one in the wild. There we were, however, looking through a chain link fence at one in Thailand.

Our guide then took us to see the real attraction: the four tiger babies, two males and two females. The guide said they were about five weeks old and hadn't yet developed the ability to see. They were fuzzy and adorable. I couldn't believe how much I enjoyed being close to them, given I actually *hate* cats. Their eyes were a dark grey and despite being wide open they could not see us at all. They could smell us though, and moved about their pen very low to the ground being very cautious in their movements. Petting them was like petting a regular house cat except their hair was more coarse and stiff. Their paws were already large and their tails quite long. I snapped what seemed like a hundred pictures of them while they napped, played, and crawled all over each other. Isabelle was quite surprised at her awe and amazement for these beautiful little creatures. I reminded her that we were not getting a cat when we got home, just in case she may have had any crazy thoughts.

At Mae Sa Park we ascended the tiered walkway to the top of the 10th falls in about 45 minutes, and were dripping with sweat upon arrival. The falls, and the river itself, was nothing I hadn't seen a hundred times before. What was unusual was the sight of perhaps three or four families apparently washing themselves and their clothes in the muddy waters. Naked children bounded from rock to rock and chased each other while screaming with playful delight like only small children can.

Aside from the rather unexpected sight of bare asses I did enjoy the walk and getting in touch with nature. The rushing water of the falls cast a relaxing spell over me and chilled me out even further than I already was. It reminded me of the walks Isabelle and I had done the previous fall in preparation for the trek to Machu Picchu. *Machu Picchu—was I really there? It seemed like so long ago.*

Yor's Wat was underwhelming: a complex of aged and decrepit buildings. *I was so tired of buildings.* I usually loved buildings, but I was actually tired of seeing them: temples, palaces, and forts again and again and again. India ruined me for buildings. I had seen thousands of structures on this trip and it was difficult to separate them in my mind; so many melded together into one giant pile of stone and brick.

Chiang Mai had given me exactly what I needed: time to recharge my batteries. I had spent several days actually *trying* to do nothing—and it worked. I relaxed, drank many, many coffees, and spent a little time with a few tigers. What more could I ask for?

Vietnam—Cross the street at your own peril

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and the Mekong Delta

Having been through decades of war—the most recent being the American War—Vietnam was emerging as a tourist destination of choice in South East Asia. It offered fantastic bargains and incredible natural beauty. Its troubled past had always fascinated me and I was eager to learn about the complexities of its society and people.

The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) offered a sobering look at the American War and the events that led up to it and it left me feeling somber and somewhat sickened. It wasn't the American helicopter, tanks, or war planes sitting in the compound that shed much light on anything, it was the hundreds of photographs that told the shocking story of what happened to the country since the war of independence from France. Pulitzer Prize winning photos were scattered amongst the many black and white and colour photographs that put to shame the pictures we are accustomed to seeing in the press today. Having grown up after the *Vietnam War* I never knew much about it, other than through Hollywood movies, but walking through the tiny museum was a true education, one we could all use.

Visiting the Reunification Palace was like stepping back in time to the 1960s and early 1970s. The architecture, design, furniture, and fixtures reminded me of the frozen-in-time look that Cuba offered, itself stuck in the 50s. As I walked through the palace I felt the intensity of the place, the energy that pervaded its rooms and hallways. I walked through the President's old office, seemingly untouched in nearly forty years, and the bunkers beneath the building where the communications rooms and teletype machines still sat, eerily silent. On the roof was a replica American Huey helicopter, representing the famous one that departed the roof back on April 30, 1975 as the Northern forces charged the fences and took over the building, the city, and the country.

I couldn't help but consider: Did they really reunify this splintered country? Was everyone really on the same page? I wasn't sure. What I did know was that this society was one of fast-moving, hard-working people the seemed to not let their troubled past bog them down. They moved forward, constantly, and did so with an incredible work ethic and smiles on their faces.

Outside of HCMC are many, many, gems of historical magnitude. One of these was the slightly over-rated Cu Chi tunnels. Just outside the city was an area of southern Vietnam that was, during the American War, an enclave of fighters that fought on behalf of the North. Being essentially surrounded at all times the Cu Chi people built hundreds of miles of underground tunnels to move around, fight, and survive. Tourists were now able to visit the tunnels and actually shuffle through some of them (uncomfortably bent over) just to get an idea of what it must have been like for the Cu Chi people over 40 years before. The area was booby-trapped to the teeth with vicious traps of nails, knives, and nasty medieval devices to maim the unlucky bastard that fell in it, enabling the Cu Chi to interrogate and slowly torture them. Tourists also had the option to shoot AK-47s and M-16s at a shooting range to get an idea what that was like. Needless to say, I declined.

The Mekong Delta is a huge area at the end of the Mekong River where it fingers out and drains into the South China Sea. Home to millions of people dependent on the river for their welfare, the delta was also a major draw for tourists. Isabelle and I ended up on a two-day trip that allowed us to see the local people up close as they went about their days making rice noodles, selling fruits and vegetables, and even making coconut candy. Rickety wooden boats cruised around rather recklessly all over the rivers and canals seemingly effortlessly going about their business. Our boat of tourists cringed as other boats nearly cracked into each other as they tried to sell their goods to passers-by. At the floating markets vendors raised long poles into the air, affixing at the top whatever it was that they offered for sale, including various fruits and vegetables, such that potential buyers could spot them from a distance.

During a lunch stop on Tortoise Island we visited a coconut candy factory during a huge downpour. The workers there cut and wrapped the candy by hand, in a rhythmic, almost hypnotic, process. The candy itself was actually pretty good, if a bit chewy. At lunch I had some fruits I had never tried before: lychee, jackfruit, and dragon fruit, and I enjoyed them all.

Nearby to the restaurant was a glass enclosure that was home to a massive snake that was apparently available for pictures; the kind of pictures that people take when they have the snake wrapped around them. For some insane reason Isabelle decided that she wanted to have this snake draped over her shoulders; despite looking rather pale in the face and

looking at me with fear in her eyes. When the snake was placed on her shoulders I quickly snapped a picture. I was proud of her for facing her fears because I knew there was no way I would let a slimy snake near me.

Bui Vien Street, a strip of a few blocks absolutely jammed to the rim with cafes, restaurants, hostels, and tour companies, was our home in HCMC. There were literally hundreds of choices for nearly everything within a short walk. Coffee, convenience and 5,000 Dong (about 25 cents) per hour Internet access—all within a couple of blocks of highly populated human density. We ate Thai, International, Vietnamese (including the ubiquitous pho noodles available at Pho 24—a restaurant offering nothing but pho noodles in dozens of formats), and most everything else, except Indian despite the fact that a Lonely Planet pick, Akbar, was right next to our hostel, Hung Han.

Hung Han was a great deal and was very clean, minus the ubiquitous tiny little ants that ravage absolutely everything in Vietnam. The girl that worked there, Trung, reminded me very much of Vien Nguyen, a woman I used to work with back in Calgary during the crazy dot com boom. She looked like a younger version of Vien and the resemblance was uncanny. Everyone at the hostel was friendly and they seemed to all work very hard—much like everyone in Vietnam I supposed.

Hawkers and touts in Vietnam tended to accept “No” the first time, and with at least some grace and dignity. One exception was an old guy in Can Tho outside our hotel just before we boarded our bus. He kept asking where I was from and I kept saying it didn’t matter where I was from. At one point I asked him where he was from. His response was not what I had expected. He said that he was from Thailand but that he was actually Chinese.

Just to confirm I asked, “So, you are a Chinese man from Thailand in Vietnam trying to sell me knock-off gum, is that right?”

He seemed to struggle with this for a moment as his brow furrowed and then he said, “Yes, that’s right.”

I broke out in uproarious laughter and cracked what must have been an ear-to-ear grin. “That’s great,” I said. Good luck my friend” and walked past him to the old one-legged man on crutches standing nearby and deposited the 1,000 Dong bill I had in my pocket into his bucket.

HCMC is big and busy and dirty but surprisingly not completely choking to death or teeming with smoldering garbage. There were several beautiful side boulevards and tree-lined streets and many manicured

meridians and gardens. Motorbikes and mopeds outnumbered cars at least fifty-to-one by my estimates and it made for great entertainment trying to cross the streets. I realized after the first couple of days that it was easier to just keep the same pace, the same line, and not look anywhere but straight ahead when crossing the street. If I slowed or deviated from the line it actually made it more difficult for everyone on motorbikes and mopeds to adjust their speed and direction. They were all rather skilled at flowing around human obstructions in the street. Fortunately there were no cows, goats, sheep, or other four-legged beasts for them to maneuver around otherwise it may have been even more chaotic than it already was.

We spent our last evening in HCMC at Bobby Brewers, a backpacker haven offering Western food and movies in a mini-theater, having sandwiches and relatively expensive choco-coffee-like cold drinks. It seemed a fitting way to end our week in Vietnam, a country that not long ago was not even on the travel map. It was now an accommodating and fascinating place to visit, offering great value for the dollar. It was hard to believe that war and destruction sat so close in its immediate past, within reach yet thankfully far away.

On the flight from HCMC to Singapore I took a quick look at the Singapore Air inflight magazine *Silverkiss* and figured out that the approximate distance from HCMC to Singapore to Sydney to Vancouver (Isabelle's stop on the way home to Montréal, then Toronto) was 12,554 miles. I could not have imagined such an immense distance before the trip. Now that I had covered some of these distances and visited so many amazing places everything else was likely to feel small, if not a bit boring. A six-hour drive from Toronto to Montréal would feel like a quick commute from then on. A flight from Toronto to Calgary, usually about a four-hour hop, would pass in the blink of an eye. Traveling anywhere would pale in comparison to the time and distance I had experienced on this journey. I had established a new sense of size and scope in my consciousness and nothing, truly nothing, would ever be the same.

Australia—The beginning of the end

Sydney and Coffs Harbour

Sydney

Upon arriving at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport I immediately started looking for a taxi. We had booked a B&B in Newtown, a neighbourhood not far from the city centre and also not far from the airport. I thought we were in for a fairly smooth experience; it was Australia after all, the first world. It wasn't Bolivia or Tanzania or something like that. It *should* have been no problem. I should have known better.

Getting a taxi was surprisingly easy. Just follow the signs and line up. Next. Next. Away we went, with a young taxi driver named Ho.

"Where are you from?" I inquired as we drove off.

After negotiating a particularly hard left turn he replied "I'm originally from Korea, but I moved to Australia about ten years ago."

I looked at Isabelle and then back at him. "So, you know your way around Sydney, then?"

"Oh, yes, I have been in Sydney many years. Today is my first day as a taxi driver, though."

I held back the words forming in my throat and said it in my head instead: You've *got* to be kidding me. I looked at Isabelle and muttered "Can you believe this?" She didn't seem to be phased.

"It should be okay, Sweetie, she replied. We have a map and directions. We'll just talk him through it."

"I can't believe I have to give directions to a taxi driver."

I started thinking about the likelihood that we had actually landed in the taxi of a first-timer. I didn't like the odds, and thus I didn't believe him.

I'd been given this line before and it generally meant the driver was laying the groundwork for a series of mistakes and missed turns that slowly added to your fare. I started getting a little annoyed. My stomach tightened. I hoped against hope that it really was one in a million. Within minutes my initial thought was proven right.

"You needed to turn left there," Isabelle instructed. She looked at me pointing out on the map how that was a one-way street and now we needed to circle around.

"Sorry, I will turn at the next light," he offered.

I jumped in, "Actually, that was a one-way so you need to circle around."

Suddenly Ho inexplicably turned the wrong way at the next light, taking us further away from where we need to circle back and much further away from our destination.

"Where are you going?" I inquired with something less than a patient voice.

He started to look a little flustered. I grabbed the map and looked for a way out of the mess. "Turn right here," I instructed.

Rather than listening to me he screamed through the light, heading straight. "What are you doing?!" I yelled.

"Calm down, Sweetie," Isabelle soothed.

I couldn't stop the words from escaping my mouth. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

"I will find a way back," Ho sheepishly replied.

"That's great but there is no way I'm paying you for all this extra driving."

"Just relax, it's not his fault," Isabelle interjected.

"He's trying to play us and there is no way I am going to pay for this extra bullshit."

I scoured the map trying to figure out where the hell we were. I noticed a street sign that gave me a clue and I yelled at Ho to turn left at the next light. Finally, amazingly, he actually listened to me and careened the car left through the intersection.

"We're almost there," I offered, to nobody in particular. "We're at the next corner, roughly."

Of course he blew right past the corner. I wondered if I was on some kind of gag TV show where people act like total assholes trying to frustrate unsuspecting victims. I looked around the taxi trying to find a hidden

camera or microphone. *This must be a gag. Nobody can be that much of an idiot.*

“Stop! You went way past the house. Back up please.”

Finally we arrived and I hopped out as quickly as I possibly could. The meter read \$37 so I offered him \$30, more than enough to pay for the actual fare. Isabelle gave me the evil eye. I so badly wanted to be right and not pay him for screwing around.

“Fine, here’s \$35. Please go away,” I said, exasperated, shoving the cash in his face. I snatched my backpack and stormed away from the car toward the house.

I went up the steps to the B&B and followed the instructions to get the key for the door. Within seconds we were in. We learned something interesting about our B&B right away: there was no second B. It was a bed, no breakfast. We were off to a great start in Sydney.

We were planning to go to Coffs Harbour the day after next so we had only about a day and a half in Sydney. Rather swiftly we visited the Opera House, walked across the Harbour Bridge, and walked around the Circular Quay area. Using the Day Tripper train passes we went to some other areas including: Bondi Beach, where we watched the waves come crashing in at Lookout Point; Kings Cross, where we had sandwiches at Café Hernandez; a ferry ride to Manly and a brief walk around the quaint main street; Chinatown, where we ate cheap Thai in the food court at the train station; and then back to Newtown. The highlight was not actually any of the above. The highlight was the lesbian couple going at it on a bench near the Newtown train station.

Coffs Harbour

About a six-hour drive north of Sydney is a small town called Coffs Harbour, perhaps most famous for its rather massive Big Banana, one of the first of many Big Things in Australia. There are approximately 150 Big Things scattered throughout the country including: a penguin, guitar, cigar, mushroom, prawn, orange, crab, cow, and of course a boxing crocodile. The Big Things are sculptures and works of folk art that were created, it would seem, to give people a reason to stop and stretch their legs after driving impossibly long distances between places across a mostly barren island.

Despite the lure of phallic-shaped massive fruit the reason for our visit to Coffs Harbour was to see Dayna, a long-time friend from Canada, who had recently settled there. A six hour drive seemed very little effort in order to visit with one of my favourite people in the whole world and someone who had traveled at least as much as I had. Dayna and her boyfriend Matt, a Canadian-born Aussie, had just settled back in Australia only a few months before we arrived.

Coffs Harbour immediately reminded me of Hawaii: crystal blue waters, blowing offshore breezes (a bit chilly at that time of year), and large bungalows on quiet streets only steps from the beach. Dayna and Matt greeted us warmly at the door with big smiles and open arms.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Dayna exclaimed

“I can’t believe it either,” I replied. It’s so good to see a familiar face after all this time on the road.”

Isabelle and I lingered perhaps a bit too long as we embraced them, feeling the comfort of their friendly and loving energy. Having had no contact with loved ones, other than Isabelle’s parents while in Egypt, for nearly five months I hadn’t realized how strange it felt to suddenly be around that energy again. I felt my own energy level rise and my body began to fill up again. I hadn’t realized how depleted it had become. I could have stood there for much longer and hugged them both but I was anxious to catch up and share travel stories with them.

Dayna and Matt originally met while teaching English in Korea many years prior and had spent the previous four months traveling extensively before settling in Coffs Harbour. They were the epitome of a beautiful couple (inside and out) with amazing energy and positivity that literally flowed out of them and affected everyone around them. I couldn’t help but smile as I considered where I was. I sat on the couch and looked at the other three people in the room with ear-to-ear grins. I felt a group hug coming on again.

Over the course of the next four days and nights we swapped amazing travel stories, both good and bad. I recounted our exodus from Bolivia while Dayna told of their harrowing experience getting into and out of Tibet. There were literally no breaks in conversation for four days and it got me excited about more travel in the future.

Isabelle and I walked on the beautiful beaches and had lunch at one of the two restaurants on the jetty. The entire time we were there I felt completely relaxed, as though I was truly on a vacation. That was a feeling

I had not felt often on the trip. What a perfect way to end our around the world adventure. I didn't feel that I was traveling at that point, I felt stationary, warm, and comfortable.

Before dinner one late-afternoon I decided to mix it up a bit. I had noticed a bocce ball set and questioned whether anyone would care for a match. I happened to be rather good at bocce ball so I was looking for a little competition.

"Sure, let's play couple against couple," Matt proposed.

"I hope you know what you are getting yourself into, my friend," I said with a wry grin and evil chuckle.

I didn't even confirm with Isabelle if she wanted to play and quickly raced to the backyard to set things up.

"Get ready to be schooled," I said with perhaps a bit too much confidence.

"Gee, are you a little competitive?" Dayna inquired. "I've never seen you like this."

"He's actually pretty good," Isabelle said.

I knew how competitive Isabelle was too so she may have just been trying to mess with their minds a little.

I stepped up and tossed my first ball within inches of the white ball. I was a little surprised, given it was my first shot, but I didn't let on. I simply spun on my heel and started with the trash talk.

"Oh, this could be a short game, kids."

Matt, a very laid back and gentle soul, gave me a look that said: watch out, bitch, I'm pretty good too.

We played into the wee hours—about 5:30 PM, when it got dark outside—and after a hard-fought, spirited and sometimes aggressive match, Isabelle and I emerged victorious, 8-7. I proudly hoisted the inaugural Travelers Cup—a coffee mug—and paraded it around the living room and kitchen as though I had just won the Stanley Cup.

Just southwest of Coffs Harbour lies Dorrig National Park, one of about 200 national parks in the state of New South Wales. The park is an incredibly diverse World Heritage rainforest that offers several walking trails from the top of the mount on which it sits to the floor of the valley. Isabelle and I chose the longest path route available (6.6 km) and were lucky enough to enjoy our walk alone. It seemed every two minutes we had commented to each other on the amazing wildlife scurrying around in the bush and the immense size of the trees, some rising over 200 feet in

the air and 20 feet around at the base. Suddenly, just off the path, I saw the brush bend and a blur of movement startled me.

"I think it's a kangaroo!" I exclaimed.

"Where?" Isabelle inquired excitedly.

"Right there," I replied, pointing about ten feet through the underbrush at a small clearing.

"Oh my goodness, I think you're right!"

I supposed I had envisioned something a bit different; perhaps something larger and more light brown in colour. Maybe that came from all those cartoons I saw as a kid. The kangaroo was quite small, perhaps the height of a small child, and was nearly red in colour. Suddenly another appeared and almost immediately they both scurried off into the woods.

"That was pretty cool. I'm so glad we were lucky enough to see that," I said.

"That *was* cool," Isabelle replied.

I remembered reading or hearing somewhere that it was apparently not a good idea to scare or otherwise piss off a kangaroo because they had been known to get a little testy.

"It's a good thing they seemed to be in a good mood."

Sydney

Day 148—I was back at Café Hernandez, a Lonely Planet-anointed cafe in the Kings Cross neighbourhood. Isabelle was on a plane heading home and I was alone for a week. She was due back at work right away, while I still had a few weeks left on my leave of absence. We'd been together all day, every day since leaving Toronto so it would be good to have a short break from each other. I never expected that I would ever spend that much intense time with any one person in my life and not only did I do it but I survived intact and I believed we would both be stronger for it.

I found a clean looking place to call home for the next seven days in the Springfield Lodge just off Darlinghurst Road. It was once the red light district of town but had cleaned up significantly since. There were still remnants of the old ways, however: night clubs—strip clubs—like Porky's and numerous sex toy shops.

Kings Cross was also backpacker central and it was common to run into fellow travelers (most of them half my age) at the Internet cafes and coffee shops nearby. I choked a little at having to pay \$3 AUD per hour

for Internet access after paying the equivalent of 33 cents per hour in Vietnam. I couldn't help but wonder why it was that the poorest countries with the worst infrastructure had the cheapest Internet service and the first-world charged an arm and a leg for access.

Sydney's version of the Calgary Tower, or CN Tower, is called, simply, Sydney Tower. It offered the highest view in the city at 260 metres and on a clear day, which I was not blessed with that particular day, it was possible to see the Blue Mountains some 50 kilometres away. When I looked out at the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or the Opera House, or the Botanical Gardens, or Darling Harbour I felt a real connection to the city. As soon as I had arrived I was already drawing comparisons to Rio and Cape Town for its incredible natural geography and urban life meshing together so smoothly. Despite its sprawl and large population (4.5 million inhabitants) it was surprisingly clean, easy to get around in, and mixed old world charm with ultramodern architecture.

Bondi Beach is known for its fantastic surfing and from Lookout Point I sat and watched dozens of would-be riders get up on rolling waves and then suddenly disappear into swirling whitewater. Incoming waves at the lookout smashed into the well-worn rocks and rocketed up into the air—sometimes over 40 feet high—before crashing back to earth. As the wind blew and the waves crashed I felt myself releasing all of the stresses of the previous days and weeks. I felt as though I was levitating above the rocks, not unlike how I felt in Jordan as I looked out over the peaceful valley below.

The thoughts and images of the previous five months began running through my mind. I felt as though I was watching a very long and detailed PowerPoint presentation at lightning speed. The images flew by so fast they blended into one another and I barely had a chance to fully realize and interpret an image before another one materialized. Amazingly, the images appeared chronologically; precisely as I had experienced them over the past several months. Each one represented a snapshot point in time and reminded me of my experience there. I seemed to float off into another dimension completely detached from my physical body. My senses heightened and I felt as light as a feather.

My mind raced through thousands of images and my body seemed to re-feel the emotions associated with those images. I felt the highs and lows of my adventure—the joy, elation, love, and awe, along with the anger, frustration and angst—in rapid succession, yet I felt completely

relaxed, calm, and centred. It was as though a gentle yet powerful cool breeze was blowing into my lungs and every muscle in my body gave up its desire to hold me together in one piece. An almost magical force held my spine and head in a perfectly straight line with absolutely no effort on my part. Image after image flew past, imprinting each scene and its associated emotions on my conscience. It was with sudden realization I came back to the present moment and looked at my watch—nearly an hour had passed.

Something I had always wanted to see was an Australian rules football (or just *football* to people there) game; something I was better suited going to alone, which, of course, I was. I headed to the Sydney Cricket Grounds on foot from the lodge. As I passed through the various streets and neighbourhoods on the way I felt immensely calm and safe. As I walked I thought back to Africa where I was nervous, and even scared at times, walking outside, even in daylight. In so many places along the journey I felt at least a little on edge, at least wary of my surroundings. In Sydney I felt like I would get to where I was going with my eyes closed, and felt completely at ease.

Before even entering the stadium, where the Sydney Swans were hosting the Richmond Tigers, I sat outside relaxing on a bench near a family of Swans supporters. A very large husband, a heavy-set mom, a ten-year-old son, and a seven-year-old daughter were all suited up in red and white Swans garb: sweaters, t-shirts, hats, and even the long, plastic, air-filled tubes that make a thud sound when smashed together. The two kids chased after each other, whacking one another on the head and butt. Eventually the mom, a curly-haired, bespectacled woman with an angry look about her snatched the boy's tube and smacked him with it over the head.

Then she said, "Next time I'm going to punch you right in the face."

I'm sure my mouth gaped open at that point but thankfully she didn't see me. I started to chuckle briefly to myself imagining the woman lunging, off-balance, fist clenched, at her defenseless young son. So much for my image of Aussies being kind and gentle like Canadians.

In my seat in the stadium for only a few minutes I knew it was going to be a long day as I realized I was sitting amongst several Richmond fans, the kind that like to drink excessive amounts of beer and yell at referees. Soon after the game began the vulgarities started from the young lad behind me: "Soft cocks!" The most popular comment in the first quarter

was, “Christ, what the fuck was that?” Thankfully Sydney jumped out to a 39-1 lead and that pretty much shut them up for the rest of the game, which Sydney won 139-57.

An AFL game would not be complete without a fight—in the stands. The same foul-mouthed fans behind me were interrupted during a particular rant by a rather large Swans fan a few rows back from where I was sitting. After a few thrown profanities the largest of the Tigers fans stood up, knocking me in the head in the process, and took a swing at the other guy. After a short scuffle cooler heads prevailed and the tension settled down. People took their sports very seriously in Australia and I was glad to see it, and stay out of the way.

Australian football has been around for about 150 years—twice as long as American football, and slightly longer than Canadian football. It was a different game of course. It was also different from the other football—what North Americans called soccer. It was not the *other* football either: rugby. There was tackling but there was no equipment. There was passing but it was done by kicking the ball or hand-punching it to a teammate. It was played on a massive field that would easily tucker out North American football players—a Cricket field. There were four quarters of 30 minutes, not four quarters of 15 minutes.

The only two things I could find in common with North American football were that a “goal” was worth six points, as is a touchdown, and there are uprights, through which the objective is to kick the ball. The difference, however, is that there are four uprights, creating three scoring zones—the middle one being worth six points and the outside two being worth one point. The one-point score is called a “behind,” which really has nothing to do with what just happened. In Canadian football if the kick goes wide and/or through the end zone then it is worth one point and is called a “single”—a much more apt description in my estimation.

Players must move the ball by either kicking it or hand-punching but not by throwing. Any kind of throw or toss would be whistled down. Kicks made and received by a teammate allow the receiving player a certain amount of space from which to make the next play—a bit of a reward I supposed. A player receiving the hand-pass was not afforded this luxury of time and space so you could count on that player being head-hunted by the other team.

It was a very quick game with (usually) lots of scoring. It was a great combination of speed, power, finesse, accuracy, and just plain toughness.

Even I, a believer in the Canadian game of ice hockey as the fastest and most exciting sport in the world, was converted to a sport Aussies have been enjoying for many generations.

In contrast to the drunken exit at the end of most sporting events, AFL games at Sydney Cricket Grounds ended with an announcement encouraging fans to keep the noise down and to be respectful of fellow patrons. What!? After plying young twenty-something, testosterone-pumping males with beer for three hours they were expected to be respectful of fellow patrons? Well, it was the Cricket Grounds after all, the last vestige of truly uptight British behaviour-conforming rules, and everyone quite behaved themselves.

After the game I headed to a café on Oxford Street called Ampersand. Its uniqueness lay in the fact that it had over 30,000 used books for sale. There were tables and small chairs at which to read said books in various rooms, whose walls were stacked floor to ceiling with bookshelves.

I sat drinking my decaf mocha in one of the rooms, surrounded by three walls of books and a fireplace on the fourth. It was all very Victorian, though not scary-Victorian like the B&Bs in South Africa. An elderly couple was chatting a few feet away as they browsed the paperbacks. Music was booming just a bit too loud out of a speaker above my head. I suddenly had the thought that someday Isabelle and I would be that older couple. They looked very comfortable and seemed to be enjoying their drinks and each other. I would love it if Isabelle and I were like that, 30 or 40 years from now—just hanging out having coffee and reading books, in love after many years. I missed my wife.

I rolled out of bed in my room at the plain but comfortable Springfield Lodge the next day and was surprised to see something I hadn't seen in well over two months—rain. I needed my elixir, the staple of my traveling diet—the café mocha. I quickly flipped through my trusty Lonely Planet travel guide to find a new place to go. The rain subsided to a drizzle as I headed out of the lodge toward Bar Coluzzi on Victoria Street.

Darlinghurst Road was quiet that morning. All of the other backpackers staying in the neighbourhood were probably up three or four hours later than I was so they likely wouldn't be up for a little while. I made my way to Victoria Street in only a few minutes, splashing the wet sidewalk as I shuffled along. Despite going to bed at a very reasonable hour I felt a bit slow that morning. *Was I too old for this extended traveling stuff?* Kids half

my age were up partying all night and would be bouncing around the streets in a while, as though nothing happened last night. I hated that.

Bar Coluzzi was a tiny little place that spilled over into the sidewalk and nearly onto the street. I often wondered how Lonely Planet selected these places; it seemed pretty random sometimes. I was casually looking at the photos on the wall of semi-famous people that must have had a coffee there at some point in the last 50 years, trying to focus above the din created by what seemed like a thousand screaming and gesticulating Italian men. Despite a valiant effort I couldn't find anyone famous, other than Henry Winkler of course. Did *The Fonz* count as famous?

A tall young lady behind the counter yelled out "Café mocha!" and I swiftly moved to retrieve it. One quick sip and I knew why the place was a landmark: I got the most powerful jolt of a non-alcoholic beverage I believe I had ever had. That was just what I needed.

I made my way to Circular Quay and the old Customs House, which was now part of the Sydney public library. I saw a sign that said Internet access was free and immediately wondered what the catch was. I approached a rather dowdy-looking middle-aged woman at the information desk.

"Is the Internet access really free?"

She looked at me like I was an alien of some sort and said, "It absolutely is."

Throughout my entire trip I had yet to get free Internet access so I still couldn't quite believe it.

She saw the tentativeness in my eyes and repeated the good news: "It's free sir. Go ahead and use it as long as you want."

I immediately jumped to one of the screens and started surfing. I felt a bit like I was robbing someone and it gave me a strange sense of exhilaration.

What did I have to research? I had been on the road for over 150 days and would be leaving soon. I already had a place to stay and I already knew where I wanted to go in the few remaining days I had left. I felt suddenly at a loss. I must have spent the equivalent of a week online since I left Toronto and there I was with free access and I had nothing to look for. I didn't want to see how my investments were doing because I knew they were in the tank. I didn't really need to check my emails because I had been communicating with friends and family through the blog and through Skype. I had nothing to investigate, nothing to research. Then it hit me.

How far had I traveled on the trip? How far would I have traveled when it was all over? After several hours and a few swear words I figured it out: over 82,000 kilometres which, I learned, was more than twice the circumference of the earth (40,075 kilometres at the equator) by plane, bus, car, train, and boat—no wonder I was tired.

My first Rugby League game that night was soaked by rain. The end result: Sydney Roosters (seriously, who named these teams?) 19 vs. Wests Tigers 10 at the Sydney Football Stadium. Why they call this *footy* (AFL fans call their game footy also) was beyond me. There were no fights, at least no fights near me. The fans were as nuts as football (that would be soccer to North Americans) fans in Rio or hockey fans in Canada.

In my short time there I had come to recognize that Australians were passionate about sports. Some of the most popular sports were rugby, soccer, and football. Understanding what all these things were took some time. After a significant effort I had finally figured it all out, sort of.

Rugby came in two forms, the first being the traditional Union Rugby, characterized by the scrum and the plodding and grinding movement of the ball up and down the field. The objective was to score a try (a touchdown in North American parlance). Possession was the name of the game and often the scores were very low. The second was League Rugby, which was derived from Union Rugby and was essentially created in England when certain teams wanted to actually be paid for beating the crap out of each other, therefore turning professional. League used mostly the same rules but had sped up the game by limiting ball possession to six downs (somewhat like the NFL 4-down and CFL 3-down style) before kicking it to the other team. League was much faster, had more scoring, and rarely ever was there a scrum. Fans of each style defend their game vehemently.

Football is not soccer. Soccer is soccer. Rugby is sometimes referred to as footy though it doesn't have much to do with feet, per se. Much like how North American football has hardly anything to do with feet either. Confused? Back to football—Australian Rules Football. This was a game played on a cricket field (What? Why are we talking about cricket? I thought we were talking about football. Soccer? No, football. Oh, right, footy. No, not Rugby; *football*. Oh, sorry, please continue) and involved kicking the ball through posts at either end. Like Rugby (both kinds) the players have no protective equipment and smash into each other at

high rates of speed, tumble to the ground, and then bounce back up like nothing happened. Suddenly it was all crystal clear.

Day 155—The last day of my odyssey was upon me. I was sitting at the Starbucks on the departures level of the Sydney airport watching people go by and wondering where the time had gone. I knew I'd be facing that moment eventually but it seemed like just yesterday I had arrived in Lima; yesterday and a hundred years ago at the same time. Had I changed (other than the length of my hair)? I had been trying to convince myself that I hadn't, at least not in a major way. I was sure I had; certainly on some level.

I remembered never wanting the trip to end and I also remembered, during the tough times, wanting it to be over sooner. Now that the end was at hand I wished I could take those thoughts back. I wanted to tell the universe that I was sorry for having such negative thoughts and I felt like trying to negotiate for more time. I knew that couldn't happen of course. The time was upon me and I had no choice but to head home and move on with the rest of my life. I had traveled around the world—My World—and the detour was over.

Ending Thoughts

In the beginning this trip was about taking action on a dream I had had since I was about nine years old; to travel around the world I was discovering in the colourful pages of my favourite book—an atlas. A more developed dream was to travel the world as a young man in my early twenties, like many others did. It was the classic backpacker vision, with my own slant. It was about circumnavigating the globe and was intended to be seen through the eyes of a young man with little to lose and much to experience. I realized very quickly that this was not going to be that trip. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, I was much older than that young backpacker vision of myself.

I knew I couldn't live in the past, though part of me was very much tied to that vision, to that feeling. Why didn't I do the trip fifteen years prior? One word: fear. It drove much of what I did and didn't do, as was the case for many people I supposed. I spent some time during the early days of the trip being mad. First for waiting so long to do it and second for thinking this would somehow make up for not doing it then. I was very much in my head the first two or three weeks. Isabelle commented on it regularly, even pushing me to talk more and tell her what I was thinking or feeling.

Frankly, I was struggling with my thoughts—struggling to figure out what I actually thought and felt about what was going on. Was I really mad or was I just frustrated? I had too many questions, perhaps, especially when the days were ticking away. It came to me, slowly, that this was not my dream trip. It was something similar, but also quite different. I was 36-years-old, with a wife, a job, a house and a mortgage—I wasn't the 21-year-old with no real responsibilities to speak of. It was a different experience altogether.

Had I lost the ability to travel the world as a young twenty-something? Yes, I had. That annoyed me. There was no real reason not to do the trip back then. Nobody told me I couldn't, or shouldn't. Not a single person. Not even my parents tried to sit me down and explain why it was a stupid idea to consider. I told *myself* that I needed to finish university, get a job, and settle down into life. Don't take risks, I told myself. What an idiot I was. I hamstrung myself for almost two decades with that way of thinking—all rather unnecessarily.

Over the 155 days of my incredible journey I had come to know that the way everything had worked out was exactly the way it was supposed to work out. I had spent that time letting go of the old thoughts and reprogramming my mind to come to terms with the past. The universe and I, unbeknownst to me, had been collaborating the whole time. It didn't do me much good to contemplate all the what-ifs. There was nothing I could do about the 21-year-old me. Letting go of the old dream had not been easy but I knew it was supposed to be that way.

My logical mind evaluated the 155 days of the trip and told me that I was fundamentally the same person regardless of where I was and what I was doing. It sounded rather obvious but it was a comforting thought also. I had conducted myself essentially the same way on the trip as I would in my life at home (with, perhaps, the exception of an occasional outburst of frustration). Robin Sharma says, "As you live your days, so you live your life." How inescapably true is that?

How do you live your life? How would you describe it? Generally, what you do in a day is reflective of what you do in your life. Put together a few days and think about what you did, what you thought, how you felt. Does that not essentially encapsulate your life? When is the only time we live our lives perhaps differently than our *normal* lives? I would argue that this occurs when we are on holidays. On holidays we tend to do things quite differently. We get up late, eat too much, spend lots of money over a short period of time (and not worry about it) and see and do things we normally wouldn't. Do you wake up and go to Karnak or the Taj Mahal every day? Likely not.

Holidays are an escape—an escape from our normal lives. We go to a place in our minds where we have no worries or responsibilities. In most cases we wait an entire year or more so that we can escape for just two precious weeks. We come to regard our lives as prisons from which we watch the clock until it's time to attempt an escape. What happens

when the escape comes to an end? Our mind tends to shift back into our reality—the reality that is our normal day-to-day life. It could be 9 to 5, kids, mortgage payments, and the crushing worry about any number of things.

We then go back into prison for another year (voluntarily!), or perhaps less if we're very lucky. What is the point of all this? What would the escape look and feel like if it were more than the usual two or three weeks? Could you maintain the oversleeping, overeating, and over-visiting? Would you want to? What would your life be like away from your reality for a month, two, or more? Would you still consider it an escape? Where would you be escaping from? Where would you be escaping to? What would happen if you left your normal life for months or even years? As you live your days, so you live your life.

When your holidays are long enough it's possible for new behaviours to arise. It is said that behaviours, or habits, can be changed in about 21 days—strangely coincident with the typical maximum length of a vacation in North America—so anything more than that could very well change the way you conduct your normal life. That is exactly what long-term traveling does—it breaks you out of your normal life and creates a new reality. It goes beyond holidaying, where you spend the first few days trying to forget about work and the last few days dreading the return to work, and becomes life. Did I fundamentally change as a person over this period? Not really. I still got up at a reasonable time, I researched destinations, I made arrangements, and I worried about missing planes, trains, and buses. I loved my wife as much as ever.

A significant amount of work goes into long-term traveling. Planning, researching, and coordinating—it all takes time and a considerable effort. Nothing happens without you doing it so results are largely in your hands, understanding, of course, that sometimes things are outside of your control; delayed baggage, mud-slogged roads, and botched elections included.

I deepened my experience and connection to the world, more so than I could have had I sat in front of the T.V. on weekday evenings after long days at the office. I would not have met dozens of fascinating people nor seen some of the world's wonders.

I now have an innate understanding that what I learned will affect my life for the rest of it in some way. This adventure was not entirely about seeing sights and putting them into my memory banks—it was about

being able to draw on these experiences forever. It's both frustrating and exciting to know that I won't know when I'll draw on these experiences. It could be next week, or 50 years from now—I simply don't know. I firmly believe that it will happen though.

I've seen so many incredible things—things I wish I could have spent more time absorbing. On many occasions I felt rushed through the experience, either by our busy schedule, our guides, other tourists, or my own racing mind.

I've heard many stories of people going to some distant destination to find themselves. I suppose they feel they don't know who they are or may think a change of scenery will improve their lot in life somehow. What I know of this phenomenon is that you can't find yourself because you are with yourself all the time, hence you were never lost. I believe that at the end of the day you are who you are no matter where you are.

Will you learn something new through extended travel? Almost assuredly you will. Will your life be transformed in some dramatic way? Perhaps. Are you still fundamentally the same person? My guess would be yes. Will your core values change because you went somewhere for a few months? I'm guessing not. Don't get me wrong, radical changes can and do happen when traveling. The danger in it is setting the expectation within yourself that it will happen. That will likely lead to disappointment. It's not just the major shifts that should be celebrated but also the seemingly small ones too. After all, people don't usually take off on an adventure such as mine because they like the status quo. They probably want a detour.

Epilogue

Vagabonding

In an article written in *National Geographic Traveler* (April 2008, Keith Bellows) the question of how to define vagabonding was posed to well-known author, blogger, and traveler Rolf Potts. Here was his response:

“Vagabonding is about long-term travel. It’s about taking time off to travel deliberately. It’s more than just a vacation, where you’re escaping a place. It’s a time when people chase their travel dreams, those dream trips they thought they couldn’t do. It can be for two years or it can be for six weeks. It’s all very personal.”

He went on to say in that same article,

“. . . if you wait for vacation time to happen, it never will. You’ve got to create your own time for vagabonding.”

Well said, Rolf, well said indeed. I can’t remember how many times I told someone on or after the trip that I was not on *vacation*. Vacation is two weeks spent trying desperately not to think about the office. And the moment you do you swear at yourself and start counting how many days are left before you go home and return to dragging your sorry ass up and down the steps of the sweaty and dirty subway stations to and from the prison—I mean office.

The trip, which, by the way, is what it will forever be called—*The Trip*—was life on the road. I had the same types of expenses as in regular life. I needed food, shelter, transportation and everything else for a *regular* life. I needed to plan what I was going to do each day, what I was going to eat, and how I would get around. I just happened to do it for 155 consecutive days while circumnavigating the globe. At the same time most other people did that death march in the subway.

Home

Upon returning home Isabelle and I immediately began trying to have a baby. Amazingly, she got pregnant right away.

“Holy shit, that happened fast,” I said to her, as she showed me the home pregnancy test.

“I know. I’m your over-achieving wife!” she beamed.

Things seemed to really be coming together for us. We had just experienced an incredible trip around the world and now we were going to be parents.

I had not spent much time considering what or who I was going to be *after* the trip. I had spent so much time preparing for it that I had not considered what life would be like once I got back. Who was I going to be now that I was back at work, back into the routine, and now going to be a dad? *Who* was I going to be in *my* world? *That* was a great question.

By the numbers

82,000

Number of kilometres traveled by plane, car, bus, train, and boat (the circumference of the earth at the equator is 40,075 km)

6,000+

Number of pictures taken (three cameras; one died in Bolivia, one bought in Brazil)

6,000

Number of kilometers traveled by car (mostly driven on the *wrong* side of the road)

300

Number of pictures posted to the blog

155

Number of days traveling

40

Number of entries made on the blog

40

Number of dollars lost despite reaching into my pockets for something literally thousands of times

38

Number of postcards sent

32
Number of plane take-off and landings (approximately 70,000 km)

20
Number of countries visited (17 really visited, three were airport stopovers or departures)

4
Number of current New Wonders of the World visited: Corcovado, Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, and Petra. The others are Chichén Itzá (been there), the Great Wall of China (some day), and the Colloseum (been there).

3
Number of badly needed massages received (Argentina, India, and Thailand)

3
Number of apartments rented (Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa)

2
Number of countries where I drank water from the tap (South Africa, Australia)

1
Number of high-powered handguns placed on coffee shop tables within a few feet of my surprised eyes (Israel)

1
Number of times urine was splashed into my mouth from a bag being held out the window of a moving bus

0
Number of times I lost my passport

0
Number of times I was really sick (in a debilitating way that is)

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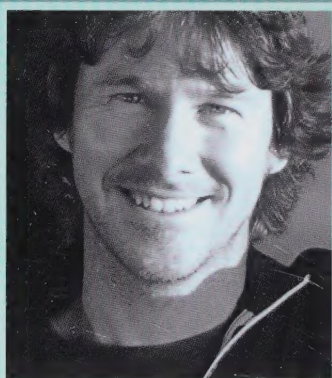


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In life we are occasionally faced with detours. Some of them are thrust upon us just when we think we have life all figured out. Sometimes, however, they are self-created. We choose to take them, driven by some inner desire or passion. Author Jason Thiessen's extraordinary adventure was just such a detour—borne of the dreams of a young boy with only an atlas as his guide to an unseen world.

Nearly thirty years after those dreams began, they became a reality. Thiessen, a man with a wife, a career, and a mortgage, set out on a journey of discovery to find purpose and meaning while attempting to answer lifelong questions. His detour from an otherwise traditional life path took him to South America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, India, Southeast Asia, and Australia, ultimately traveling twice the distance of the circumference of the earth. Just as his adventure brought him from the heights of the Andes to the depths of the Dead Sea, so too did Thiessen take an emotional journey from feelings of excitement, fulfillment, and joy to those of anger, frustration, and despair.



Around My World: A Detour on Life's Journey tells a story for anyone who is on their own journey to reconcile modern-day pressures and realities with the insights that world travel can bring to one's life.

Jason Thiessen has published articles and photographs for various travel websites as well as newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He has traveled extensively, including his 155-day odyssey around the globe. He resides in Toronto, Canada, with his wife and two sons.

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